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THE POET'S AUDIENCE;  
AND  
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# THE POET'S AUDIENCE;

AND

## DELILAH.

BY

CLARA SAVILE CLARKE.



CASSELL & COMPANY, LIMITED:

LONDON, PARIS & MELBOURNE.

1891.

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## THE POET'S AUDIENCE.

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### CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH THE AUDIENCE IS DESCRIBED, AND  
THE FOREIGN GENTLEMAN MAKES HIMSELF  
AGREEABLE.

THEY were all sitting round the Poet, and were applauding as they had never done before.

The window was open, letting in the hot afternoon air, and showing the small patch of lodging-house garden.

The Princess kept the garden in order, and the Artist, a small, sandy-haired man, with slits for eyes, helped her. The Princess was the Poet's cousin—though the relationship was vague and distant—and she lived with her mother a flight below him. She had been so nicknamed by the most insignificant of the

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company, a grave-faced man, almost hidden in the corner, a journalist, who did not worship at the shrine of pure unadulterated art, but wrote for money—for money alone. The Poet had been good enough to say the name suited her, so the Princess she had remained.

Her chair was close to the Poet; if he was the king, in a much lesser degree she was queen. Her power was borrowed. No one ever dared to dispute with the Princess, for the very excellent reason that it meant to dispute with the Poet too.

They all knew her black dress by heart; every button and seam was an old friend, and without speaking of it they felt a kind of lazy interest in the way she darned and mended, and made it last longer than any other black dress had ever done or had ever attempted to do.

The day was Sunday, and outside was that quiet peculiar to the day; an occasional foot-step was to be heard in the distance, growing nearer, only to disappear again as it had come. There was a little breeze, also only occasional.

that stirred the one tree in the garden, and shook the dingy lace curtains in the window very gently. Inside there were the clapping of hands and murmur of admiring voices.

"I fancy," the Poet had said before he began to read that day, "I fancy in these few songs I have surpassed myself."

They were only too willing to agree with him, if they could first admit an impossibility: namely, that the Poet could in any way surpass the work he had already done.

The other Artist, who lived a few doors off, and did illustrations for one or two unknown papers, had feebly suggested that such poems might benefit by being published with pictures. And the Poet, who knew his weakness, promptly came down on him, while the rest of the Audience with unfeigned horror stared him of countenance.

The Princess said, "They are very beautiful"—meaning the new songs—and sighed.

The Artist proper ran his fingers through his hair in imitation of the Poet's favourite gesture, and murmured a few words about



"Art being ennobled each time the Poet touched pen and blackened paper."

The Novelist, a stout fair man, with a florid face, sitting on the extreme edge of his chair and breathing heavily, began as usual, meaning to speak at length on the subject of the poems, but the Princess somehow silenced him. He was almost remarkable for the size of his pocket handkerchief. On this occasion, as was his custom when annoyed, he took it out, a large piece of glaring whiteness, shook it violently, and then with a twist of the wrist, absolutely unlearnable, whirled it round and blew his nose.

Meanwhile the Audience was still admiring. A dark, sallow-faced gentleman, of foreign birth, contented himself with shrugging his shoulders and raising his eye-brows while invoking some invisible creature somewhere up in the ceiling.

In his corner the Journalist sat and smiled. He was the only one of the Audience who did not count. His opinion was valued even less than that of the foreign gentleman, who was able to affirm that not only were all the

English poets dead and living eclipsed by the specimens before him, but those of his own loved country as well.

There is nothing more uncomfortable than to feel you do not count. The Journalist always felt so, and yet, strange to say, he never resented the fact. He sat and smiled to himself in his dark corner, and when the Princess grew most eager over the poems he smiled no longer; it is more probable he sighed.

There was an old Violinist who had once been part of the Audience who had laughed when they told him the Journalist never worked for Art's sake.

"He did once," he said, "write a poem ringing with human sympathy and human pain. That was long ago. The public laughed at him. He is grave enough now, but I fancy then he laughed too. Anyhow," the old man would always end, "he is a gentleman, and I like him."

The old Violinist was dead, and the days were gone by when people said "I like him," of the Journalist, with the same hearty ring in it, almost better than the words.

"Because they are not educated up to it," said the Princess.

"That is true; and yet what is the most faithful representation of the most beautiful truths in Nature should somehow go home to them."

The Poet fixed his grey eyes straight on the Journalist, who had stirred uneasily in his corner, and the Journalist answered—

"If it is the most beautiful truth. It seems to me only too often a cheap imitation."

But the Poet was unmoved.

"A very common mistake," he said, "of those who cannot read between the lines and have no real appreciation of its beauty."

The Artist turned from his contemplation of the stray cat and joined in the conversation.

"Take my own art," he said, "was it ever in such a poor way? Who buys pictures for their own worth now? No one. There is a fashion in Art, as in everything else, and fashion rules society. If I paint seascapes once, I must do them always; my pictures must be cut from

"He is sure to do so," murmured the Princess.

And there was a low murmur audible from the rest as well.

"I have one more poem to read you," continued the Poet. And there was a scraping of chairs on the floor, and a little rustle indicating attention.

The Poet read in an uninteresting voice, but at the same time had a way of making his points tell. The voice was not sweet, but it was distinct and intellectually sympathetic. If he meant people to like a thing, he had power to *force* most people to like it. So that to read his poems afterwards was to experience disappointment. He knew how to make them tell, and he made them, owing to his acting powers, appear very much finer than they were. He could sway his Audience by the slightest change in his voice, in his eyes, in the quick movement of his right hand, which rested on the arm of his chair, and at certain passages was lifted, as if to point out the most striking parts almost before he read them.

As usual, the poem pleased them. It thrilled the Princess, and gave her white face a new expression that lit up her dark eyes, and made her lips, always a deep red, quiver.

The Journalist had his eyes fixed on the wood-shavings in the fireplace; they blew about a little, and they fascinated him.

The foreign gentleman, who infinitely preferred something passionate, was more than content, the poem being essentially so. He rubbed his long fingers together, and said it was "Splendide," his dark eyes watching the Princess, and his white teeth gleaming under his moustache more than ever.

The Artist proper said quietly, "That is very fine," and turned back to the window to find the cat vanished, and his occupation of watching it gone.

The other Artist was too much engaged in digging his penknife into the wood table, shorn of its green cloth on such occasions, because the foreign gentleman always spilt the ink, to notice that he was expected to join in the chorus of admiration.



The Novelist began to point out the chief merits of the Poem. And the Princess had risen to listen to him, and was standing with her hand on the arm of the Poet's chair. The Poet, idly listening to his praises, let his hand drop slowly, till it covered the girl's soft little fingers. She started, and the blood rushed to her face and throat, turning her whiteness into a warm pink. The Poet smiled, moistening his lower lip, as was his habit when pleased, and drew his hand away.

The foreign gentleman noticed everything, and his eyes glistened. The rest were apparently blind.

The Journalist rose abruptly

"When is the next meeting?" he said.

"On Tuesday evening," answered the Poet.

"Thank you. I must be going."

And the Novelist shook hands with the Princess, and, annoyed at being interrupted again, waved the handkerchief, till it flapped against the other Artist's face, much to his indignation, just as he came to take leave of the Poet.

And they clattered down the narrow

But the Poet did not answer.

He went to the door, and then turned.

"I am going out to-night," he said. "Good-bye."

"Wait," said the Princess. "I—I wish you would come back. I am very sorry."

He went across to where she stood, and she turned swiftly.

"Put your arms round my neck," commanded the Poet, "and kiss me."

And he stretched out his hands towards her as he spoke.

The girl, proud by nature, winced and shuddered. Only for a moment. Then she obeyed him.

And the Monday that followed was a dismally wet day, and the Tuesday after it proved the same.

On a rainy afternoon the small sitting-room rented by the Princess and her mother was more gloomy in appearance than usual. The look-out at all times was uninteresting and commonplace: there was the small row of unpicturesque lodging-houses opposite, each on the exact pattern of its

income, enough to keep them from starving, which the Princess supplemented by romance-writing. She got on well in her own way, and wrote pretty little stories, pleasant enough to read, without really having much talent.

The foreign gentleman's room, or rather garret, was distinctly of the bare-faced poverty kind. Dirt, untidiness, rubbish everywhere. The foreign gentleman in his dress was as neat as his shabby clothes and still more shabby means would allow him to be. On this particular Tuesday afternoon with the rain outside, and his own company inside, he decided he needed enlivening, and proceeded down the creaking stairs.

The Poet's door was open ; it was plain he was out. The foreign gentleman smiled, and went on.

The Princess was also out ; in the small sitting-room her mother bent over the table engaged in recopying one of her daughter's novels. The foreign gentleman knocked, and was admitted.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "you are busy ; I beg pardon—I go."

"Oh, no! I am only copying something for my daughter. Please sit down."

If the Princess was regal in any way, her mother was distinctly the reverse.

Mrs. Barlow was worn, a little crooked, wore her caps awry, and had queer little grey eyes and a mouth that never for a moment seemed still. She had married very much above her station, and her daughter was as unlike her as it was possible for any other woman to be. The foreign gentleman had long ago studied Mrs. Barlow, and perfectly understood her.

"Your daughter, I believe, dear Madam, is out?"

"Yes, she was obliged to go to see about something. She will be back soon."

Mrs. Barlow was shrewd enough at all times; she was wondering what her visitor wanted.

"Your daughter is so like you: just as kind and good—oh, so good!"

The foreign gentleman folded his hands together as if he were praying, and smiled over them at Mrs. Barlow.

"Good," she said in her sharp, high voice,

"I don't know that I'm good. Rose is, I suppose."

"What are you now engaged in, dear Madam?" inquired her visitor.

"This tiresome copying. However, it had to be done. Rose is quite right—she really has not the time to do it all herself, and some of this had to be rewritten to please the publisher."

"Indeed, Madam; what a pity! If I could help you." The foreign gentleman leant forward and fixed his dark eyes on Mrs. Barlow.

She did not answer, so he went on.

"If I might only be privileged to copy for Miss Rose, just a little—just a little piece. I should be so glad—so delighted to help."

The woman opposite him watched him out of her small pale eyes, and wondered again what he wanted.

"We could not afford to pay you," she said, bluntly.

"Madam, you insult me. Pay me—impossible! I do it for you—for you to save you the trouble—the great trouble you have to take.



Indeed, Madam, I shall feel honoured if you will permit me—will allow me to help you.”

The small eyes twinkled.

“To help my daughter, you mean,” she said.

“On the contrary, Madam, to help *you*.”

The foreign gentleman kept his eyes fixed on hers; he was perfectly master of his voice, his smiles, his actions.

Mrs. Barlow was baffled.

“I will ask Rose if she is willing,” she said.

“But why, Madam? You give me the work—I copy—I return—you tell her then.”

“No, I must tell her first. You do not understand Rose.”

“And now, Madam, your head, is it better? Does it ache again?” The foreign gentleman lowered his voice to an expression of gentle concern.

Again the woman shot him a quick glance from her pale eyes, and again she found him smiling as before.

“It ached last night,” she said. “Rose worried me. I never have any peace, I think; it is worry from morning till night.”

"You are so unselfish, Madam ; you never spare yourself." But the foreign gentleman could not conceal a gleam in his eyes which she caught.

"No," she answered, sharply, "I am not unselfish. I pretend to nothing I am not. I hate having to work, and like everything done for me. Oh, here is Rose."

Rose, dripping wet, in an old ulster buttoned up to the chin, her face very white, and her lips firmly set, the Princess in spite of the rain and the shabby clothes. She glanced quickly from the foreign gentleman to her mother, and then back again.

The mother returned the glance much as a cunning animal might have done ; there was nothing to be learned from her.

"Well," said the Princess, "did you want anything?"

The words were addressed to the foreign gentleman, but they rather disconcerted both her listeners.

"No, Mademoiselle," he said ; "that is—I came to offer my services to—to Madam."

With her grave eyes on him he dared not say "to Mademoiselle."

"Services, in what way?"

At first his "dear Madam" had no intention of helping him out, but she resented the idea that it was an impossibility for her to have had a visitor without some special reason. So she broke in, her sharp thin voice almost squeaking as a mouse might have squeaked.

"I got so tired with this copying, and he came to offer to do some of it for me—for us I mean. You know, really, Rose——"

But Rose was looking scornfully down at her without speaking.

"If you would let me help Madam—just in this little way," begged the foreign gentleman.

"I am sorry it tires you, mother"—the Princess spoke in an even, cold voice, with her eyes on those other pale ones in front of her—"but I cannot accept the offer. I shall in future do the work myself."

"Oh, dear, no, Rose, you mistake—I don't grumble. Dear, dear, dear! You are always angry about something."

And the foreign gentleman began to interfere, when the door opened, and the Poet walked in.

The Poet was one of those people who know instinctively directly they enter a room what is going on, or has just gone on in it. At a glance he took in the present situation, if even Rose's face as she turned to him had not shown her relief at his entry.

"Well," he said, quickly, "I have something to say to you, Princess."

Then he glanced at the foreign gentleman, who did not seem inclined to move.

The Princess was silent. She had drawn close to the Poet and stood beside him, looking down at the two seated at the table. They were stealthily eyeing each other.

"A very wet day," said the foreign gentleman, "is it not?"

It was impossible to say to whom it was addressed, and no one answered. There was a pause; then the Poet said, in his most frigid tones—

"I have something to tell you, Princess—I am sure you will excuse us."

"I believe you would die if I died, Rose," he said.

"Yes, I should," said the girl, promptly. And the old mother broke in—

"There, there, that is enough! We must do something besides write. Don't you feel hungry, Rose?"

The Princess laughed.

"Rather," she said. "I will go and take my things off, and then we will have tea. You will stay?" she asked, looking at the Poet.

"Yes." He smiled at her as if she had been a child.

"That is nice. Mother, remember there is a meeting."

"Yes, bother the thing! Why can't they meet in some other room, and let ours alone?"

"Because we are the only people with a sitting-room. Come, mother, don't grumble to-night. I am going to take my cloak off."

And at tea she sat next the Poet almost unrecognisable. His influence was remarkable and her pride seemed gone. She was hardly the Princess at all, save that her



omen to-night! Impossible; why, we are to be happier than we have ever been before."

"You are to be happier," she said.

"And you too, Rose. Surely you are glad at my happiness you——"

"Yes," said the girl gravely. "When you are glad I am glad, and when you are troubled I suffer——when you——Oh! suppose I should have to go away——or——"

He smiled.

"Nonsense again, Princess. You are tired to-night."

And he drew her into his arms, so that together they looked up at the red glare, and the Poet suggesting it was a fire somewhere, both, without any reason for it, laughed.

And the Audience was a very wet one that night. The Novelist was most indignant with the rain, and expressed his feelings in violent language; the other Artist seemed depressed; the foreign gentleman being dry, was smiling, evidently forgetful of his late rebuff. The Artist proper said that the rain had beaten down his best geraniums, and the Princess was

hand. They felt the lack of enthusiasm themselves, and tried to pump it up. The Journalist, noting the wistful expression in the girl's dark eyes, was the most successful, much to the Poet's astonishment. The Journalist, whose low, rich voice came from his dark corner as from a tomb, "was certain of the book's success, was certain—of course all along—that the poems being what they were, would be accepted; for that reason, the event being foredetermined, there was very little to say, except to congratulate the Poet on the ultimate success, so certain, also, of the little book."

The Princess, for the first time, absolutely beamed on the dark corner, and the grave-faced man sitting there having relapsed again into silence, had a wistful expression of astonishment as he watched her, being by no means elated at his own success.

After that they discussed the cover and the paper desirable, and the Novelist warmed to the subject and ceased blowing his nose. The other Artist was still an Advocate for illustrations, or at least headings to the chapters, but the Poet

crushed him with the unanswerable assertion "that there were no chapters."

The foreign gentleman said nothing, but he kept his eyes, with an ominous glare in them, fixed on the Princess, who was far too excited to notice him. They had a shorter meeting than usual, and broke up early, each going shivering out into the damp night.

The Poet gave the Princess a hurried good-night kiss, witnessed from the stairs by the foreign gentleman, and she went in a strange mood between happiness and unusual forebodings to bed. The whole house seemed to settle down for the night, only outside the rain came down relentlessly, drip-drip on the window panes and splash down the broken chimneys.

## CHAPTER II.

THE POET PAYS A VISIT, AND THE FOREIGN  
GENTLEMAN FORSAKES HIS GARRET.

THE end of the week that followed was as fine and bright in comparison as its beginning had been dull and wet.

The Princess after neglecting it for some time suddenly turned her attention to the garden, and much to the Artist's delight, raked and weeded as if her life depended on it. She drenched the daisies, and drowned the caterpillars with surprising energy, considering the heat. Whatever forebodings she had felt, they were gone with the rain, having had no facts to back them. She thought—

“I was overtired and absurd just when I ought to have been most happy—and mean to be—and am.”

She would stop in her work and glare at

the Princess alone in the little sitting-room. She was kneeling on a low seat in the window, with her elbows resting on the sill, and her chin in her little hands.

The Poet went up to her and touched her hair with his firm, wiry fingers.

"Rose," he said.

She lifted her face swiftly, and gave a little cry of delight.

"Oh, you are back," she said.

"Yes. Have you forgotten me? Do you love me any less to-day?"

"Never any less; I always love you." And her white face was bathed in blushes, which robbed her of her dignity, and made the Princess very human and womanly.

The Poet moistened his red lower lip, and then said—

"Love, Princess, is a grand thing."

"Yes," said the girl, "I think so, sometimes: not when I am alone, but when you write of it, then it is grand indeed."

And the Princess lived it, which is sometimes more to the point.

The evening was very quiet; some children playing in front of the house had moved away; their voices were still dimly heard in the distance. The sun was setting, and at the same time gilding even the bare lodging-houses with a kind of gold. It lit up the girl's grave face and earnest eyes. It fell on the man beside her, with his red lips and smiling face. It brought out the rich blackness of her hair, waving backwards, and parted from the white brow. It caught a counter-gleam to its own in the man's clear grey eyes, and fell on his hand, resting on her shoulder.

"You love me? you love me?" queried the Poet.

And the Princess, untiring, repeated the words after him, simply—

"Yes, you *know* I love you."

Then again there was silence, till she said—

"They will be coming soon, and you have told me nothing of your visit. I know you hate describing things unless you are in the mood, but I should so like to hear about it."

Another pause.

The Poet moved further away, and leant against the window-frame without looking at her. The Princess dropped her hands listlessly and folded them together.

"I told you," the Poet said, "that my publisher was very rich. Well, the place is lovely; a pretty house with a verandah, and a lawn sloping down to the river, plenty of boats, and a small steam launch. He ought to enjoy life."

"Well, what did you do?" asked the girl.

"His daughter took me out in a punt after lunch. She punted, I needn't say, and I lay back among the cushions."

"His daughter?"

"Yes; a society girl in white muslin, and a hat full of vulgar pink roses."

"Is she pretty?"

"Yes."

"Oh!"

The Princess moved a little uneasily, and the Poet smiled to himself, or at the opposite houses, for he was certainly not looking at the girl before him.

D

"Had she read any of your work?" asked the Princess presently.

"No," said the Poet slowly, "so I wrote her something. It was rather pretty, describing the white muslin and the gay roses in glowing colours, I can assure you."

"Why did you do that?"

Nothing could have hurt the Princess more than the fact that he had written verses to please this other girl.

"Don't be foolish, Rose," he answered. "It was most diplomatic. The old gentleman was delighted."

"Yes—but——"

There were a hundred things she could have said, but loving him she refrained; the disciple of Art, scribbling verses in honour of the artificial roses, being not the least of them. But the Poet chose to see these things in a very different light.

"What is the matter?" he said.

Then, as she attempted to rise without answering, he laid his hands on her shoulders, and held her firmly, exposed to the angry glare



in his strangely magnetic eyes, and well able to see the scornful curve of his red lips.

"Princess," he said as she hung her head, trembling a little, and dangerously near tears, "lift your face."

She looked up at him quickly, and he shook her slowly backwards and forwards.

"Are you," he asked between his teeth, "still a silly child?"

His eyes seemed to grow more and more steely; his voice frightened her. She struggled, bit her lips to restrain their trembling, and then bowed her head and burst into tears.

And the red lower lip was moistened, as was his habit when most content.

"I—I am sorry; I did not mean," began the Princess, proud no longer—as, indeed, she never was with him.

He gave a low, scornful laugh, and drew her to him, and bending, kissed her lips.

"There, go and brush your hair and dry your eyes; they will be here soon," he said.

And the girl obeyed him without a word.

And in the cool evening the Novelist was

And then they all came upstairs, and the Princess, very pale, with suspiciously red rims round her eyes, brought her mother in with her, and began speaking very hurriedly.

"My mother wishes you all to stay to supper to-night, to drink to the Poet's success. I hope you will."

And Mrs. Barlow, with her pale eyes and slippery mouth, seconded the invitation. It is needless to add that it was accepted, and as she shuffled from the room the rest of the company took their accustomed places.

The Artist near the window, full of pride in the scoffed-at sunflower; the Journalist in his dark corner; the foreign gentleman, with his oily smile, close to the table; the Novelist half slipping off his chair, owing to his fondness for the extreme edge of it; and the other Artist with his sore eyes, the result of his delicate work, also in his accustomed place. Only the Princess had changed, for she sat on a small stool at the Poet's feet. They had never seen her do it before.

"How she loves him," they thought; and

the Poet knew it, and the Princess felt it, as they, too, had never realised till then.

The Poet had something new to read them, and they praised and applauded just as they had always done. The soft evening air came in at the window, and seemed to be bringing the scent of the melancholy mignonette plant, placed on the sill, in with it. In the gardens opposite, the women, bare-armed and laden with small babies, talked to each other across the palings doing duty for a division. The small clock on the mantelpiece ticked away briskly and struck the hours, while the evening grew, and the lights were brought in, just when the Poet, as usual, was most vexed at an interruption.

It was then, with them all assembled, that he announced :

"I have promised to go down again to my publisher's for a few days. I must see him about the book, and he is not coming up to town for some time, so I shall be off to-morrow."

And the Princess, sitting at his feet, turned very white, and shuddered as he spoke.

If previous supper parties, few and far between, had been a success, the one that followed far excelled them all. The Poet was brighter, wittier, and more charming than ever. His Audience was proud of him. They drank to the success of his book, and he made the Princess, sitting then opposite to him, drink it twice over.

"In Art. In love," he said.

And her eyes sparkled, and her cheeks reddened, as she met his glance and raised the glass to her lips.

And the gaiety of that supper-party is indescribable. It was as if they wished to make up for the flatness of their last meeting. The Poet laughed and rattled on as a child might have done, almost recklessly happy, so that his high spirits, being at all times catching, infected the rest. When they did at last rise to go, the foreign gentleman, who had been sitting next to his "dear Madam Barlow," rose and proposed a fresh toast. And if when they heard it was the old mother, with her pale eyes, they any of them felt inclined to smile or to be indignant, they were far too happy and reckless to show it.

And the Poet—on the top of it—proposing the Princess, which no one but himself would have ventured to do, they drank to her, and said Good-night.

The Poet himself was, as usual, the last to go. The old mother was calling to the Princess from the bedroom, but she went quickly across the room, with a strange look on her white face, and a queer sound in her voice.

“Give me your hand,” she said.

And the Poet, smiling, held both hands towards her. The girl knelt, and laid her soft young cheek against them.

“You are my king,” she said. “My king!”

And he, lifting her, laughed as he kissed her almost fiercely.

“Good-night, Princess,” he said; “good-night.”

And the next morning proving as fine as those immediately preceding it, the Princess went out early and did not return till late in the afternoon. When she did, her mother met her, with a hurried note from the Poet. It said simply:

"I hoped to see you before I left, but you appear to have forgotten I was going. However, good-bye; I shall be back in a few days."

The girl made no remark, and wondered stupidly why she had not taken the Poet's announcement more seriously.

"I never really knew he meant to go to-day," thought the Princess; "but, as he says, he will be back soon."

And the warm days continued, and the soil in the garden grew dry and cracked in places, while the flowers drooped, and the Artist lived watering them. The little road seemed to bask in the heat, the glare was overpowering, and the blinds were down in all the windows. And all through the warm days the Princess wrote, and waited, but the Poet never came. The Audience had had its last meeting, which had also been its happiest, and its days were over, never to return again. There were no remarks made; they asked no questions after the very first, and the Princess grew very, very white, and said the heat tried her.

It was a warm evening, as sultry as those

preceding it, and the Princess was in the garden attending to her flowers. The sun, which was preparing to set, sent a strange yellow glare over everything, including the girl's shabby black dress, which showed every patch and darn, and shone in the places where it was most worn. She knelt close to the small bed, and cut some dead leaves off a geranium.

"Mademoiselle is busy," said a voice, an insinuating, plausible voice, which she knew well belonged to the foreign gentleman.

"Very busy," she replied, without turning round.

"If I might help you. It would be so great a happiness!"

"No, thank you."

"Oh, but why, Mademoiselle? Why do you so favour one, and leave others, who care perhaps more deeply, to suffer in vain?"

"The Artist has always helped me, and as we get the flowers between us—I mean he pays too, and they partly belong to him—I naturally let him help me in looking after them."

"You mistake. I did not mean the Artist."

The foreign gentleman smiled, and sometimes his frown was preferable to his smile, so false was the latter. His cruel lips curled satirically, and as they parted, showed his gleaming white teeth, as if to remind the beholder that, in common with a rat and other vermin of its kind, he could bite.

"Whom did you mean, then?" inquired the indignant Princess, lifting her flushed face, flushed, perhaps, with stooping, perhaps with his words. He looked down at her, still smiling, till she instinctively recoiled and paled. Then he said:

"You see, my dear Mademoiselle, you *do* favour *one*, and you know you do. As for me, *hélas!* I would gladly gain a smile from your beautiful eyes, gladly work till I died, to obtain a gentle word from your lips. But you do not care. You will never care, I fear."

"No—never."

The Princess turned away, and bent over the flowers again. The foreign gentleman looked down at her with no pleasant expression of countenance. It was much as if he meant to



hate her, since he might not love. But the girl did not see it, and he spoke again.

"You are good, Mademoiselle, but you are not kind. You are proud, and you have love enough in your heart—only for one. Perhaps that one is worthy of your love—perhaps not."

"I decline to discuss the Poet."

"The Poet! Indeed! I did not say it was the Poet. *Mais*, you are *indiscrète*, Mademoiselle. So it is the Poet you love; the Poet is my rival!"

"Rival!" The contempt in her voice stung him, till the yellow light had no power to colour his face, for it was a livid white, and his lips parted in a straight, cruel line across those same sharp teeth.

"Rival! What have you to do with it? Really, Monsieur, you mistake—you presume. I have said I am busy, and must beg you to leave me."

"Busy! Pulling off a few leaves. Pardon, you will fall."

He put out his hand to help her to rise from her knees, and she pushed it from her. As she

did so, her eyes met his, and yet she did not wait to read the meaning there. She turned quickly away, took up her watering-can, and, without glancing at him again, entered the house.

So the foreign gentleman stood and smiled at the sun, and the sun blinked back at him before it sank behind the opposite row of houses and disappeared

And the days grew more sultry, and time went on, while the Princess waited and the foreign gentleman watched her, still with his sinister smile and cunning eyes.

Then the Poet wrote a short letter, begging her to pack and send all his belongings from the little room above her own.

"I ask you to do it," he said, "because you understand that every scrap of paper with anything written on it is precious, and will send me everything."

And the Princess worked in the close room as if she had been pressed for time, and sent him everything, as he had desired.

A few weeks later another letter came.

She waved him back as if she had indeed been a Princess, and he slunk against the wall, half-cowed. Only for a moment, however. Directly she had passed him, he laughed a soft, cunning Southern laugh.

"Well acted, Princess; you should take to the stage."

And receiving no answer, he went, still laughing, down the stairs.

But although the rest of the Audience spared the Princess any allusion to the Poet, they had changed in a way that astonished her very much. Before, with the Poet to protect her, the Princess had been a privileged person—a Queen, with the Audience for her kingdom. But the Audience was broken up, and she remained, a very beautiful woman, poor, and shabbily dressed. Her crown had fallen from her with the Poet's marriage, and her subjects were gone.

The Artist ventured to grumble when she neglected the garden, and the Novelist ignored her, and hurried away if she met him in the street.

The other Artist worried her about illustrating her books, and was almost rude when she refused to let him do so. The Journalist she never saw at all.

"Why are they all so changed?" she wondered. "Just when I feel the most need of friends."

And the poor Princess was to feel the need far more in the days to come.

One afternoon when she came in, tired and worn out, from her publisher's, she found her mother in the sitting-room, with a queer twinkle in her pale eyes, and a certain nervousness, unwarranted and remarkable.

"Is anything the matter?" said the girl, sitting down wearily on the window-seat.

"The—the Journalist has come into a lot of money," answered the old woman, watching her daughter keenly all the while. "It turns out that he belongs to some good family, and had quarrelled with his father, and had been turned away from home."

"Really?" said the Princess. "I am glad he is rich. Don't you wish we were, mother?"

"They say he will have two or three estates, and never need to write any more." The pale eyes shifted their glance from the Princess to the door, and back again.

"That is nice for him. His writing, you know, was always most contemptible. I don't think people like that should be allowed to write. And the money always comes to people who will never help their Art with it. Now——" But the Princess broke off suddenly, overcome by a certain remembrance, and her pale face flushed.

For a few moments there was silence, then the mother, as if with an effort, began again :

"You are tired, Rose?"

"Very tired, mother."

"You always are."

The thin voice was fretfully raised to a grating squeak.

"No, not always. At least, I used not to be. This weather has tried me; I shall be all right again soon."

"Yes, yes. I—I, too, am very tired of being all alone when you——"

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"In this case they happen not to be. I have decided to marry again—in fact, I am married."

The girl sprang to her feet.

"Who——?" she began, when the question was answered only too clearly. The foreign gentleman, with the same sinister smile on his dark face, stood before her.

The moment was an exciting one for all the three people in the hot little room. The very air seemed to feel it. The Princess breathed with difficulty, and was silent and very pale; even her lips, which rarely changed colour, grew white too. The foreign gentleman seemed to have won a race, in which the Princess was not only beaten but stunned. A selfishly-nursed spite, cherished against her unconscious daughter for years, seemed to have accumulated in the mother's small eyes. The girl never looked at her. She was reading the expression in those other eyes, looking down into her own. And what she saw there seemed to fascinate her as a snake fascinates its victim.

And the man himself was doubtful, even

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then, as to whether he loved the girl in front of him, or hated her most.

"Have you nothing to say, child?" the old woman broke in.

The Princess stirred and shivered. With an effort she turned and looked at her mother.

"I——; it is so sudden. I must go and think about it. I—I must get used to the idea;" and she moved towards the door leading into the bedroom.

"You cannot go in there," said the foreign gentleman, quickly. "I—— You will have another room, now, to yourself. Is it not so, my dear?"

"Yes. Rose, you had better go and arrange your things. I moved them myself; I am sure it was very good of me to save you the trouble."

"Where—am I to sleep, then?" said the Princess.

"In my old room," answered her smiling stepfather, holding the door open for her to pass out.

If she started she gave no other sign.

Her tired limbs seemed almost to refuse to

carry her upstairs. The wretched garret was a mass of dirt and rubbish, with the girl's scanty belongings flung down on to it all. An idea occurred to her, and she dragged herself downstairs again.

The old landlady was deaf, and the poor Princess spent a torturing half-hour in explaining matters; when at last it was done, the woman was good-natured enough, and even helped her to move her things.

So it happened that the Princess went to bed, crushed and supperless, in the Poet's old room, and the garret was left to the undisturbed possession of the dust and the mice.



## CHAPTER III.

THE PRINCESS, HAVING DISCOVERED AN ENEMY,  
FINDS A FRIEND.

To wake in a strange room, with the warm morning sun pouring in at the window, to sit up and stare vaguely about her, and then suddenly remember, and to cover her face with her hands and burst into tears, was the fate of the poor Princess on the following morning.

Her dark hair hung in picturesque disorder, her white face was almost as pale in colour as her snowy night-gown, her great dark eyes stared wistfully at the opposite wall, for the Princess did not cry long ; it was better, she thought, to try and think over matters a little—a process that proved so unsatisfactory that she dressed, and went downstairs.

She scarcely noticed that the foreign gentleman said “Good-morning,” or that her mother

eyed her sheepishly, and seemed a little ashamed. She was no sooner seated than a strange kind of persecution, which the girl was wholly unprepared for, began.

"Is that book nearly finished?" asked her stepfather, quietly.

"No," said the Princess, in a cold, half-muffled voice.

"Why not?"

"I——" she restrained herself, and he, noticing, smiled contentedly. "It needs more plot. I have not thought it out sufficiently."

"Would not any little facts from your own life be interesting? Just a little like your own——"

"I think not."

"My dear," said the foreign gentleman, turning to his wife, "your daughter is constrained; she cannot bear to talk of her own life."

"Don't be silly, Rose," said her mother. "We all know about it, so you needn't be a fool."

"Know about what?" The Princess turned

her proud white face to her mother, who returned her stare with interest.

"Do you want me to pretend, too? I, who used to have to sit and listen to the nonsense you talked, and be snubbed by you for my pains. *I'm* not going to hold my tongue, I can promise you!"

The girl lowered her eyes. She began to wonder if she was going mad. Her mother, in whom she had at least believed to a certain extent, seemed to be a changed person. If the Princess had at times tyrannised over her a little—and she had at times grumbled—that had all seemed natural enough, as the daughter was working hard to add to their scanty income and the mother did nothing at all. But to have turned round suddenly, to wound and degrade her own child before— The Princess shuddered.

There, again, was another mystery. What had she ever done, she wondered, to injure the foreign gentleman that he should show such persistent animosity to herself? She had snubbed him a little, fearing that he had

meant to be too attentive—perhaps she had been too severe.

She little knew that the foreign gentleman would have let the man pass who had robbed him of his money, or wronged him even more deeply, but would hunt to the death the perpetrator of a careless slight, or half-unintentional snub. The girl had wounded his colossal vanity, and to say that is to say all.

The poor Princess swallowed her breakfast as best she could, and hoped to be let alone for the rest of it ; she was mistaken.

“Do you happen to know what this girl is like—this girl with money that the Poet has married ?” asked her stepfather.

“No,” said the Princess.

“Is she pretty ?”

“Yes.”

“Ah, but you said you did not know.”

“I—I made a mistake. I forget how I did know. I suppose——”

“The Poet told you,” finished the foreign gentleman. “Exactly. And what did you answer ?”

"Nothing."

"That was foolish. You should not have shown you were jealous."

"I was not jealous." The girl, driven to bay, rose and faced him. Again that look which froze her and rendered her speechless.

"Don't be so silly, Rose. Sit down," squeaked her mother.

And the girl sat down again, trembling from head to foot.

"What are you going to do to-day?" continued the thin, fretful voice.

"I—I am going out."

"Why?" asked the foreign gentleman.

"I want some fresh air. I mean, I want to think about that book. It—it must be finished soon."

The Princess could make no more pretence at eating. She tried to force down some tea.

"Yes," said the man, quietly, "it must be finished soon; we shall want the money."

The girl started, but did not speak.

Presently she said almost piteously:

"I will try and get it done soon. I—have not been very well lately, or it would have been finished long ago. The heat——"

"Oh," broke in the foreign gentleman, "you need not explain your illness. We quite understand."

Which speech was too much for the Princess. She sprang up and ran from the room.

With her foot on the first step of the narrow staircase she felt a detaining hand on her arm. The door was quietly closed behind them, and he bent so near she felt his breath on her cheek.

"You had better take care," he hissed. "Let me warn you—not to be a fool."

The girl turned; he was so close to her that their faces almost touched.

"Let me go," she said, faintly.

"I warn you," he repeated. "You are in my power, remember. You had better, I think, have married me than have me as a step-father."

She turned sick with terror, and swayed a little as if she were going to faint, which

added to her misery considerably, for he chose to consider it necessary to support her, till with clenched teeth and flashing eyes she lay almost in his arms. Her voice seemed to have left her; her breath came in quick, short gasps.

"Do you hear me?" hissed the foreign gentleman. "You had better promise to obey me in the future."

"Let me go!" It was not her own voice, she felt, speaking; she could not recognise it.

"Say, 'I will obey,' and you shall go."

She looked up into his dark, sinister face, so terribly close to her own, and shuddered from head to foot.

"I—will obey," she breathed, rather than spoke.

She heard him laugh softly to himself.

"Can you walk?" he inquired.

"Yes—yes."

And as he moved from her she swayed against the wall, and covered her face with her hands.

He stood watching her for a moment, and

then opened the door and disappeared into the room.

And with her dark head against the small bedstead in the Poet's old room, the girl crouched and sobbed as if her heart were broken.

When she did go out, she crept downstairs again as softly as a thief might have done, fearful of detection. The sitting-room door was opened immediately, and the face she most feared to see looked out at her, smilingly, watching her down the stairs. The Princess felt too humbled and frightened to stare back in return. Once outside she breathed more freely, and then gave a terrified start, to find the same cruel face watching her from the window. She never knew how far she walked that day. It seemed to the Princess, after she had once started, as if she had been walking ever since she could remember. A sort of numbness seized all her faculties; instead of thinking over her situation as she had intended, she thought of nothing at all. Everything seemed to have culminated and stopped short at the one point which she had arrived



at, and could go no further. She found herself in dingy alleys, pushed against drunken men and squalid women, and half-knocking down the miserable gutter-children. Out of these she emerged into some quiet squares, dingy and dirty too, and seemingly uninhabited; from the wilderness of unpeopled streets she gained a crowded thoroughfare, and found herself in more fashionable quarters. Well-dressed women drove past, and stared at her beautiful white face, and smiled at her shabby clothes. And well-dressed men stared too, rather insolently, and almost pushed against her as they passed. The Princess noticed these things dimly. She seemed unconscious of everything but the necessity of walking always till she dropped or died, that would be the easiest thing to do.

Suddenly a hansom cab, having nearly accomplished her wish by running over her, pulled up, and the occupant leaped out.

"Princess!" he said.

She scarcely heard him. He repeated the word again. Then she turned and smiled a little, giving him her hand.

"Oh, you—you are very rich now, are you not?"

And the Journalist, with his grave eyes searching her troubled face, answered almost mechanically—

"Yes."

"I—I am glad to see you again," said the girl, rather lamely.

"Thank you," was the brisk answer. "You are either very tired or ill."

"Both, I think. I have been troubled; but that will not interest you." The Princess half-turned away.

"Please don't leave me at once," said the man quietly; "that would be very unfriendly. I am most interested."

"My—my mother has married again."

"Your mother? I—how very astonishing! In what way does that trouble you? Whom has she married?"

"The foreign gentleman."

There was a pause. The Journalist perhaps understood more than she told him.

"Will you let me come and see you?" he said.

"You can do no good. I would rather not."

"Don't reject a friend, Princess ; that is never wise. Let me come."

"It is very kind of you, but I think I would rather not. What I have to bear is easier to stand without a listener. You see I am telling you plainly as if you were a friend."

"Yes," said the man, quietly, "as I *am* a friend. Well, then, what do you say to letting me walk with you sometimes ? Of course, I shall come for you to the house, and see your mother for a moment, and then we will have a little stroll and talk together."

"You cannot help me. It is no use."

"Perhaps," said the man, a little severely, "you will let me try."

The Princess blushed.

"I am ungrateful, I know. You must forgive me, please ; I am so stupid to-day."

The Journalist did not say anything about forgiveness ; he beckoned up the cab again, and handed the Princess into it.

"I am going to make you let me drive you

home," he said, "whether you like it or not. You have overtired yourself."

And the girl felt too wretched to protest. For some time he did not speak. Then he said:

"I will come to-morrow in the small dog-cart. I drive myself, and you must be kind enough to admire it, Princess; then I shall offer you a drive, and we will go off before they can say anything to stop us."

The Princess said nothing against this plan, neither did she in any way express approval. Her tired face grew very proud and haughty as they drew nearer home. She was vexed without reason with her companion for being there; if they drove up to the house there was no knowing what torments and sneers the Princess might have to put up with; and if they stopped the cab further down the street, she would have to explain in some way her reasons for such a proceeding to the Journalist. She chose the latter course, feeling it was the least difficult of the two.

"If you don't mind," said the girl, a quick

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rush of colour appearing in her pallid cheeks, and leaving them whiter than before; "if you don't mind, please, I will get out now. I—I would rather not drive up to the house; I——" she stopped confused.

"Certainly," was the quiet answer. And he was telling the cabman to stop, when the Princess jumped up, and before he could help her, commenced to get out by herself. The horse was at a standstill, and there was no danger, but the girl had not noticed anything in her anxiety to escape her stepfather's eyes. She was tenderly lifted down by that same gentleman, whose sudden advent, when she least wished to see him, sent her into a fresh paroxysm of terror.

"My dear child," he said, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "what a hurry you are in! You deprived your friend of the exquisite pleasure of helping you himself."

The Journalist was by their side by that time. He noticed the girl's trembling lips and blanched face.

"Well!" he said, briskly, "so I hear, Monsieur, you are married."

"Yes," the foreign gentleman smiled sweetly. "I am married; and you have been so good—so kind as to bring my stepdaughter home."

"A great pleasure," began the Journalist; but the kind stepfather continued:

"And why, may I ask, did you not drive up to the house?" The words were addressed to the other man, but his eyes sought and read the truth in the girl's face.

"I was going to surprise you all to-morrow," said the Journalist, quickly. "However, I shall still call and see your wife. I hope she is quite well?"

"Very well, I thank you."

"That is right. By-the-bye, I want you to persuade the Princess to let me teach her to drive; she needs to be out as much as she can in the open air. I will take good care of her, I promise you, and she is looking rather pale."

"Very pale," corrected the foreign gentleman. "She has looked like that for some time; let me see—ever since—I do believe, ever since the Poet went away."

"Ah, that was just at the beginning of this hot weather. That must have knocked you up, Princess. Anyhow, I hope you will say 'yes' to the driving lessons, Monsieur?"

And the foreign gentleman, knowing the girl had never liked his questioner, was willing enough to consent.

"Anyhow, I shall know what she is doing, then," he thought; so he said aloud:

"Of course, she must learn to drive. Excellent for you, my dear child, excellent!"

The girl made no answer; she had never once lifted her eyes from the pavement the whole time.

"Well, I must be off now," said the Journalist, "but shall call for her to-morrow. Then we will commence the first lesson. Good-bye, Princess; *au revoir*, Monsieur."

The girl's hand was limp and trembling as he held it for a moment in his own; for one second, she dared to lift her eyes, and as they met his, there was such a strange expression of terror in them that he was quite startled.

"We need not pretend to hate each other,"

said the foreign gentleman, as the girl chose the gutter to walk in, rather than the pavement by his side. "That does not look at all like the affectionate stepfather and daughter we really are."

He pulled her towards him, and dragged her small hand through his arm.

"Are you going to spoil your beauty by this foolish fretting?" he inquired, looking down into her terrified face.

"I am not—not—fretting."

"Then what has paled your cheeks and darkened your eyes?"

"I don't know."

"My dear little beauty, I am proud of you."

"You!"

"Yes, I. And I do not wish you to grow pale and thin. It is not, after a time, becoming. So you must please look a little brighter, and smile—at any rate, when strangers are present, and watching us."

It was evident he knew who had blanched her face and whitened her red lips.

He held open the garden gate to let her pass



through first, and opened the small blistered door with a latchkey.

"You will come down to supper to-night," he said, quietly.

And the Princess, who had forgotten she had not had any lunch, almost whispered a timid "yes."

And she went down to supper with her nerves so overstrung, and her dark eyes so unusually bright, that the man watching her saw his victim could bear no more.

He therefore left her alone, and talked to the owner of the pale eyes, who was much more comfortable under the existing order of things than she had been before. The foreign gentleman, on the consideration of being allowed to share her income, was ready enough to perform a hundred little offices and attentions, very gratifying to her selfish nature. That her daughter suffered by the change was rather a matter of congratulation than otherwise, as she had long ago ceased to care about anyone but herself, and detested being blamed or reproached in any way.

And breakfast the next day was a silent meal too, as the foreign gentleman took his in bed, and the two women had nothing to say to each other. The Princess spent the morning in her own room writing, and had a less troubled expression on her beautiful face when she went downstairs for the mid-day meal.

"Good-morning, my dear child," said her affectionate stepfather, as she took her seat; "you are a little less pale to-day: that is well."

"Thank you. I am all right," answered the Princess.

"Does the book progress?"

"Yes, it—it progresses."

"That is well. To-day, my dear," he said, turning to his wife, "to-day Rose is to drive with our old friend the Journalist, who has come into some money, you remember."

"Yes, of course I remember. What's she going to drive with him for? I thought you hated him, Rose?" The thin voice was as fretful as ever.

"No, I never hated him," the Princess answered.

It was noticeable that since she had known of the marriage she had never called the pale-eyed woman "Mother," in addressing her.

"Well, you didn't like him, Rose; it's the same thing."

"Not always," answered the girl.

"My dear child," said the foreign gentleman, "I must really beg you will not contradict your mother; it vexes me. Your hear? It vexes me."

And meeting the glance from his dark eyes as he spoke, the Princess trembled, and inwardly resolved he should not be vexed again.

The Journalist, to whom with his new dignity we must give a new name, was called Gerald Singleton, and being punctual, was in the little sitting-room soon after three o'clock.

That the old mother did not want to be bothered with him was a very transparent fact, but the foreign gentleman exerted himself to be charming till the Princess came down, when he inquired tenderly if she would be warm enough in what she had on, driving, and

played the part of the affectionate stepfather to perfection.

As soon as they were out of sight of the house the Princess breathed freely, and five minutes later she was laughing like a child. It was difficult to be sad with Gerald Singleton when he meant you to be otherwise, and although the girl never lost a certain reserve and proud coldness in her manner towards him, still she was grateful for the respite his kindness afforded her, and was willing enough to be amused.

He did not take her into any of the parks ; he felt instinctively the Princess would prefer not to mix amid the well-dressed crowd in the drive in her shabby black dress. So he took her out into the country, and was rewarded by seeing the faintest pink bloom creep into her cheeks, and by hearing her musical laughter as she gave free vent to her feelings, and enjoyed herself like a child.

"It is all so pretty," she said. "It is really very good of you to bring me."

"It is a great pleasure, Princess."

"Oh, yes, you say that, but——"

"Please, if I am to be your friend, say nothing more. I am not accustomed to pay empty compliments, and shall not begin them to you. It is a real pleasure to bring you here and see you enjoy it. We must repeat the experiment."

"You are very kind; but I don't want to come——"

"Stop again, Princess. You say I am very kind in one breath and are very rude in the next. Explain yourself."

"Oh, I can't," laughed the girl. "And I didn't mean to be rude. Of course I should like to drive."

"Very well, then; that is settled. To-morrow, at the same time."

"But my work?"

"Let your work alone; it will be all the better for your taking a rest."

And on the way home, with the sun setting behind them, he broached the subject which he knew was occupying her thoughts and driving the happy look from her eyes.

"Tell me," he said, "have you made any plans? You cannot go on as you are now."

"No." The girl caught her breath sharply. "But I haven't yet settled what is the best thing to do. If you only knew——" She broke off, and shuddered.

"Perhaps I understand better than you think," said her companion, quietly.

"Oh, you couldn't!"

"Well, we will leave that alone. The question remains, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," said the girl piteously.

"We must try and think of something," the man went on quietly. "And now that we are nearly there, I want to say one thing to you. Here is my present address, and although I intend seeing you every day, you might at some time need a friend, and you will know where to find one."

"You are very good," said the Princess; "and thank you so much for the pleasant drive."

And she went indoors so different from what she had left the little house that the foreign gentleman was almost aghast at the change.

In the days that followed, the Princess lived an entirely novel life. Stung to desperation by the events at home, she revelled in a half-reckless way in the delights the one-time Journalist was able to offer her. Walking by his side in some fresh country lane, she seemed to have assumed a manner half like her old dignified self, half childish, and wholly unlike the trembling girl, shrinking from her step-father's sneers at home. There was a quiet repose about her companion's own manner that soothed and quieted her tired nerves.

"You are a good tonic," she told him one day, and he laughed at the idea.

Somehow, in spite of his repeated kindness, Gerald Singleton, who walked straight up by the shortest cuts into most people's hearts, never seemed to grow any nearer to the Princess. She was always proud, and at the same time consistently pleasant and kind, but her very mode of speaking to him seemed to say :

"You are not the sort of friend I should have chosen, but being given me for a friend by

circumstances wholly unlooked-for, I am fain to be content with you."

Again, the idea of there being any ingratitude in the matter never occurred to him. Most people were far too grateful to Gerald Singleton; he could have dispensed with the greater part of it, being a naturally reserved man with a large heart for other people's troubles. An inconveniently tender heart it was, too, sometimes; he wished it, often, harder than it was.

The Princess never stopped to analyse her feelings at all. She went on from day to day as if she were enacting a part in some terrible nightmare at home, to wake in the green fields with Singleton by her side.

She was quite unconsciously wronging the man who was her only friend, but suffering as she did, and it being done unconsciously, must amply excuse her. Then it is difficult to say if the wrong had not been done in the old days of the Poet's Audience, with the grave-faced Journalist watching her from his corner.

If she had never wronged him more than she did then, her life might have been written



on a cleaner sheet, and her tears, had they fallen at all, been less remorseful than they were.

When the weather grew colder, Singleton refused to let her drive, unless he considered it warm enough for such an amusement.

And having paid a short afternoon call on one of these days, he turned to leave somewhat reluctantly, when the old mother called him back.

"Shall you drive to-morrow?" she inquired.

The foreign gentleman had just left the house. The Princess was sitting sewing in the window-seat.

"If it is warm enough," answered Singleton.

"Oh, it's sure to be that. Rose doesn't take any harm."

By which he knew the mother disliked his company and betook himself off as promptly as possible.

The foreign gentleman had joined a friend. Singleton, not having his carriage there, chose to walk a little way, and, his road lying in the same direction, he had almost overtaken them, when

he caught his own name, and drew back a little.

"Why doesn't he marry the girl?" inquired the friend.

It was plain whom they were discussing. Singleton clenched his fist and paled considerably.

"She would not have him, *mon ami*. That is why."

"But he's wealthy. I should have thought it was a catch."

"But if she loves—someone else."

The other man whistled and they eyed each other in silence for a moment.

A long habit of repression prevented their listener interrupting them. He knew it was better for the girl's sake to be silent. To say that he longed to thrash them both is expressing it lamely, but his firm fingers closed over his stick as if he could have crushed it to atoms.

"Loves someone else! Who may that be?"

And the foreign gentleman, smiling as only his most Satanic Majesty could have smiled, lifted a long forefinger and pointed to himself.

The other man whistled again, and then, drawing close to his companion, whispered something in his ear.

And the man following turned, with his teeth set and his veins standing out on that same firm hand like knots, and retraced his steps.

It mattered little that the old mother scowled at him, and even the Princess seemed a little vexed.

"I must speak to you a moment," he said.

And then turning to face the impudent stare of the pale attempt at eyes :

"Will you give me the chance to speak to your daughter alone?"

The old woman grinned and thought she understood him. She did not know what her husband would have wished, but was very certain about what would be the most comfortable thing for herself. If the Journalist wanted Rose, and would take her away from the eternal bickering at home, so much the better. He should certainly have the chance, and if he didn't take it, well, so much the worse for Rose.

As she shuffled from the room, Singleton moved quietly till he stood facing the girl, who had risen, with his hand on the worn, green tablecloth.

"I have something to say to you," he began.

"Yes," said the girl, coldly, "so I imagined ; otherwise you would not——"

"Wait one moment, please, before you are vexed with me. It must be difficult for you to understand how I, having left you so short a time ago, have something fresh to talk to you about. But it is the case."

The Princess bowed her head proudly, and remained standing.

"It is difficult, very difficult for me to begin. If I preface what I have to say by telling you that I am very worried over your position here, you will tell me that is nothing new, and I know it. If I tell you that having thought about the matter for some time I am no nearer the best thing to be done than I was at the beginning, you will tell me again you know that—just as I know it. If I tell you what is the truth, Princess, that since I left you certain facts have come to

my knowledge which necessitate your immediate removal from this place, you will ask me for an explanation, and I am not prepared to give it."

"I do ask," said the girl, coldly.

"I think that I have proved myself your friend; I think, Princess, that I deserve to be trusted, if I merit nothing more."

"I do trust you; that is not the point. I cannot leave this place suddenly without any reason. You must see that yourself."

"You place me in a very difficult position, but I must find somehow, for your sake, a way out of it. Princess, you could never be a companion?"

"No," sneered the girl.

"Or a governess?"

"No, again. You should know me well enough not to need to ask that."

"I do not ask it. I merely state a fact. Heaven knows I have thought of these things till I am dizzy. And yet you must come away from here."

"In time," said the girl; "in time I mean to

do so. When I get the money for this book, which is my own, entirely my own, I mean to leave and try——”

“That will not do. Excuse my interrupting you, but your mother or someone may return at any moment. You cannot wait for that.”

“If I choose to wait?”

“But you must not, Princess. Oh, if I only could make you understand!”

“What have you heard?”

“I should hurt you very much if I told you. Is it not sufficient that I tell you it is absolutely necessary that you leave this place at once?”

“No,” said the girl, quietly.

The man flushed.

“I hardly expected,” he began, and then broke off. “Princess, I did not mean to speak so soon, but have no alternative left. Will you let me offer you all I have? Will you share my home?”

“Mr. Singleton!”

The girl’s astonishment was very genuine; he saw that.

“If you will excuse my abruptness and think

it over. We have so little time, dear. I ask you to be my wife—to come away with me to-morrow and leave this hateful place for ever.”

“But I do not love you,” stated the girl, indignantly.

The man stood very still for a moment, then he said, as proudly as she herself might have done :

“I don’t think I asked you that, Princess. I had not ventured to suppose you did. I shall only ask you to try and do so—afterwards.”

There was silence for a few minutes. The Princess, like many other people of her temperament, expected to have a monopoly of pride, and was vexed at any indication of the same article in other people.

“You hurry me so,” she said at last, not fretfully, but with a quiet kind of scorn.

“I do not mean to,” said the man. “Heaven knows it is forced on me.”

He began pacing the room with a troubled expression in his dark eyes that startled the Princess.

“I can’t understand why, as I have borne

this life so long, I am not to be allowed to bear it any longer," she said.

"You are very obstinate, Princess."

"You are very interfering."

They faced each other suddenly.

"I have told you," he said, biting his lips, "that it is necessary—that I——"

"Yes, yes, I know. But I refuse to believe it, and I am not a child. Tell me your reason, and I—I will go away with you to-morrow."

"Which means you do *not* trust me."

"Which means I do *not* trust you."

Another silence. If Gerald Singleton suffered he did not show it; if Gerald Singleton was wounded more deeply than he had ever been in all his life of struggling and difficulties he did not show it; if he felt at that moment that in saving the woman by his side he would be wronging himself and ruining his whole life, he must have repressed his feelings wonderfully well; and supposing him to have felt and known it, have either been a fool or something so much better than many of us are, even in our best moments, that he deserved



more praise and veneration than if he had attempted and accomplished some great heroic feat.

"Because I feel," he said, quietly, "that you *must* come away with me to-morrow, I will tell you." His face grew for the first time pained at the thought of paining her. "I overheard your stepfather talking of myself——"

"In connection with me; I understand. Go on. That is nothing."

"He went on to say—you would not marry me——"

The Princess laughed a little.

"Well?"

Again the man compressed his firm lips, and waited a moment before he replied.

"He gave as a reason your caring for someone else.

The girl recoiled.

"Oh, you needn't tell me who. I know. I can guess."

"You can guess?"

"Yes, yes, and I can bear that. I did love him; you know that. I love him now."

"You make a mistake, Princess."

"Oh, spare me repeating it! I tell you they all knew I loved him. I am not ashamed of it. Do you want me to say so again?"

"My dear girl, you don't understand."

"Yes, I do; it is you who are stupid. I would not leave for that."

"Princess, listen to me. He said you were in love with someone, who is here now—not away, as you suppose. Do you understand now?"

"No. Here now? What do you mean? He said I was in love with——"

"Himself."

He had been prepared for her anger, for her indignation and horror, but not for the terror in her dark eyes, or the clutching of her hands at his coat-sleeve as if she were distraught, or the piteous trembling of the red lips, and the hoarseness of her voice.

"For God's sake, take me away! I will go any time! Anywhere!"

"Yes, dear——"

She broke in again:

"You don't know; you don't understand. I

shall go mad with the horror of it. Oh, Mr. Singleton, if you will save me—I—will live my whole life to show my gratitude——”

She stopped suddenly, and burst out crying in a piteous, mad way.

There was a movement in the adjoining room.

“Can’t I come in again?” squeaked the fretful voice through the door. “What’s Rose crying about, eh?”

“Wait one moment,” called back Singleton.

“Now, Princess, quick. Meet me at the end of the road to-morrow at nine o’clock. You understand?”

“But to-night.”

“My dear child, I cannot take you away to-night. God knows I would if I could.”

“Very well; I will be there.”

“That is right. Are you calmer now? Can I open the door?”

“Mr. Singleton.”

“Yes.”

“You will never remind me of this again?”

“Never, dear, as long as I live. You shall

have nothing horrible to think about—nothing to trouble you. Come now, dry your eyes and try. Oh, *do* try, dear, to look happy.”

“I am trying. Come in, mother.”

“Your daughter has promised to be my wife,” said Singleton to the pale eyes as they entered.

“Oh, has she? Well, what was she crying about, then? You are a fool, Rose.”

“Well, I want her to come away to-morrow, and be quietly married. She thinks it rather sudden.”

“Nonsense, Rose.”

“Very well, mother.”

“I have your consent?” queried Singleton, smiling.

“Of course, and my blessing too.”

The blessing sounded more like a curse.

Singleton could not restrain a smile.

“Then good-night, as it is getting very late, and I must be off. Nine o’clock to-morrow, Rose.”

He did not attempt even to touch her hand. She left the room with him silently, and crept upstairs.

And once upstairs, she knelt down beside the poet's old bed, and hiding her face against the coverlet, burst into a fresh paroxysm of tears.

"Oh, my love, my love," she cried. And then struggling with herself, but in an agony of terror, uncertainty, and regrets for what might have been, and was not, she cried until she was worn out, and the autumn evening had closed in; while the shadows creeping into each corner of the little room, seemed to touch her more lovingly than usual—creeping always till the whole place seemed one huge shadow, without any spark of light to brighten it. Up in the streets, like a ray of hope, leapt the gas-jet below the window, as the lamplighter went his rounds. And the Princess starting as it sent a long stream across her on to the bed, turned and stretched out her arms towards it.

"Oh, my love, my dear, dear love," she said, and, burying her dark head, wept again.

And the light, as if it were indeed a symbol of love and happiness for the tired Princess, burned more steadily than usual, and seemed to

brighten the little room, as it had never done before. If the one quaint tree cast its sombre branches forward to cast further sombre shadows tracing dreary tracts across the light, in the little room, the Princess never noticed it. She knelt so long and was so tired that at length she rose, and stumbling rather than walking, lay down on the little bed, and fell asleep.

When she woke it was to the music of angry voices downstairs—French oaths, mingled with the shriller pipings of her mother's voice. She rose quickly and went to the door. Her stepfather was angry, very angry: moreover it was probable he was a little the worse for his evening's pleasure too, otherwise he would have shown his anger very differently. The foreign gentleman never allowed himself to get into a rage where quiet sarcasm paid better, and it certainly did as a rule with most people.

And the girl, with a rush of pity, thought for a moment of going down to help her mother, when—like a flash—the truth dawned upon her.

She reached the door and turned the key in

the lock; then she knelt down close to it with trembling limbs and bated breath.

"She shall not go," cried the hoarse voice. "She shall not go! We are proud of her, you and I, the little beauty."

"Don't make such a row. Be quiet!" squeaked the thin voice, scarcely audible amidst the laughter drowning it.

"I laugh. I go to remonstrate with her. She will obey me. You shall see. You shall see."

And then the stairs creaked, and the Princess shuddered. There were ten, she knew, and then a small, very small landing. She heard him reach it, and went on counting. Only four more, and he would be there! Four steps and the worn lock between them! The Princess in her terror counted the latter protection as nothing. The very shadows seemed to tremble with her; her knees shook so that she feared the boards would creak below them; her teeth chattered and her breathing came in quick, short gasps.

He had reached the door, and she, almost fainting with terror, heard him stop.

Only for a moment, the footsteps creaked on again. The shadows leapt with them. He had evidently never heard she had changed her room, and sought her in his old garret.

She heard the door flung open and the first words.

"My dearest step-daughter——" ending in a wild cry of baffled rage, more resembling the roar of a wild beast than that of a human being.

Then the footsteps stumbled downstairs again, and the roar continued. The girl gathered enough to find he deemed her already gone, which she considered lucky, trusting to creep down unnoticed and unheard in the early morning.

And the night passed quickly enough. She rose soon after it was light, and put the few things she meant to take with her together. Then she looked round her sadly.

"Good-bye, little room," she said: no longer, as she stood there alone in her trouble, the Proud Princess that her world, such as it was, knew, but the trembling girl the man to whom



it had belonged had allowed to love him in the old careless days of the Poet's Audience.

Then she turned, and, unlocking the door, crept downstairs ; as she passed her old rooms, a voice broke out suddenly in the stillness :

“She is not gone ; I hear her. Wake up !”

And no answer coming, the terrified girl forgot everything but her anxiety to get away, and ran down the narrow staircase and the dark hall, unlocked the door, rushed wildly down the little garden, sadly neglected and overgrown with weeds, down the narrow street with the blinds serving as the shut, sleepy eyelids for the houses, so out into the cold city and the life before her.

And the shadows still lingered in the little room she left, and the light which had played with them was gone.

Only the cold grey of the chilly morning crept in and warned them to depart.

And the house was silently, quietly waiting to wake to life, with a hundred others of its kind, in the vast city, just as it had done and would do in the days to come, with never a backward

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glance or a single movement of regret in all the shadows clinging round it for the old times gone by and almost forgotten. And least of all did it carry with it on its bare front and cheerless rooms the signs of what once distinguished it, had it known it, from its commonplace fellows; the Meetings, also, become mere specks and shadows in the past of the Poet's Audience.

## CHAPTER IV.

A GREAT WRONG WHERE A GREAT GOOD SHOULD  
HAVE BEEN.

A COUNTRY ball at its height, and the usual sprinkling of gentlemen in red coats, and gentlemen in black coats, dancing with ladies in white dresses, and ladies in coloured dresses, at the prettiest, best decorated Town Hall in the whole county.

The chaperones sitting round the room were the best born, and the most correct also, for miles round, and the girls, rightly or wrongly, were considered the best dancers, and the men, very rightly, the best heart-breakers for miles round, too.

There was a sudden stir in the middle of the evening, following the entrance of a tall lady, dressed entirely in black, and a handsome man by her side, evidently, from the way he was

welcomed, an old favourite. The lady they had most of them seen before, having called on her and been frigidly received by her some weeks earlier, but it being her first appearance among them all, in public, she needed, as a matter of course, talking over afresh.

The girls disliked her without one exception, found her cold and unsympathetic, and decidedly too good looking. And their mothers, having an old grudge against her for having taken the best catch of the county out of their hands, talked her over, and picked her to pieces before she had been five minutes in the room. And the men who were introduced, meaning to admire, fell back with very different feelings. She was beautiful at a distance, but at a distance they would for the future find her so. She was so exceedingly cold and unbending when approached any nearer. And the maddening part of it was that she was a nobody, whom her husband apparently idolised, and persisted in calling by the absurd nickname of Princess.

She had made friends, unluckily, with the very people she should have avoided.

There were some rich Americans freshly come into the neighbourhood, having taken a certain Somebody's house, who was away on the Continent, and likely to stay there. This certain Somebody might be wild, but he was well born, while these Americans were wild, without the previous advantage. And because they had generally a writer or an artist, or someone, no matter how ill-bred, who had at some time *done something*, with them, the Princess took to them, and much to her husband's vexation, insisted upon becoming more than merely friendly—exceedingly intimate.

The American mamma being a rather objectionable person, she ignored ; the American papa was away in his own country coining the money for his family to spend in this. The American son was decidedly smart and amusing, and the American aunt, a sister to the money-making papa, a most charming lady-like person, with gentle bearing and plenty of brain. And the American daughter was bright and amusing, too, with a pretty face, engaging manners, and a very slight twang. She simply “adored,” to use her

own expression, the quiet, calm, and haughty pride of the pale Princess, and she showered pretty Parisian gifts on her, or asked her to lunch, to tea, and to dinner every day in the week. There was no harm in the girl, but she and her family proved a miserable barrier between the Princess and the rest of the county families, for whom her insignificant birth and misplaced pride had already been more than enough. While disliking the wife, they pitied the husband, and tried to make all the more of him in consequence.

It seemed to the Princess, as the ball progressed, as if every girl in the room had a lowered voice and a brighter smile for her husband, and also as if the men would never cease shaking him by the hand, or the mothers trying to pretend he was still the boy who had won their hearts years ago, and petting and making much of him as they had then.

Her own smart American friend insisted on telling her he was "a very lovely man," and explaining, when the Princess looked astonished, that she meant he was very handsome and well-made, and so on.

And the Princess, who had never thought of him as other than the grave-faced man who had been so silently attentive in his corner in the old days, and who had ended by proving himself a very kind friend, began to see her husband in a new light, and to wonder a little.

To the Princess the county people seemed very behindhand, very old-fashioned, and if the pretty, bright American had somehow overtaken her, and had run on even faster than she was used to, still she was nearer the mark, and a great relief to the strangely Bohemian Princess with her quaint mixture of ideas, half lax and half prudish.

The Americans had brought their own party with them—a number of well-dressed young men, in the army and out of it, a fashionable painter and his sister, a clever journalist who was a man of many languages, a sayer of witty things, a companion of the lowest in his profession and the highest out of it. The Princess and this journalist got on very well: he amused her and she astonished him. Her quiet dignity, her earnestness and knowledge of his own

profession, were quite startling. This woman had a history, he was thinking, just as she turned and spoke to her husband. And looking into Gerald Singleton's face, he drew forward and asked for an introduction, and, deserting the Princess, kept for the rest of the night at his side, speaking less than was his wont, and wondering again where the charm lay, and where the secret was of Gerald Singleton's success with everyone there with the strange exception—the clever man was certain of that—of his own wife.

And the Princess danced once with the smart American son, who rattled her along to the American waltz till she felt dizzy, and the County, represented by the stout mammas looking on, was thoroughly horrified.

As they went out into the hall at the end, and the bright, pretty little American, by name Alice Digby, brought the Princess her cloak, she whispered in a tragic manner:

“For Heaven's sake, Beauty, dearest, get your husband to let you come to Sandown with us. It's the loveliest fun in the world.”

And the Princess said:



"I will try. I should like it very much."

And the carriage, rolling along the dark country roads, went briskly as the rest, and the woman was as handsome and the man as distinguished as those in my Lord's, which tried to overtake them, and the Duke's company in front. Only in those others there were laughing and jests enough to warm the benumbed drivers on the box, and in the Singleton's snug brougham silence like the coldness of the night.

"You did not dance," said the Princess, at last. She had heard a few young girls soliciting the pleasure of her husband's hand in what she considered a very foolish, silly manner.

"For the sake of old times," they had said. "We know you well enough to ask you, don't we?"

But Gerald Singleton had laughed and jested as merrily as they had, without dancing with them or moving from where he stood.

"No," he answered, as if he were tired, almost too tired to speak.

"It was a pretty ball."

"Very pretty."

"Little Alice Digby enjoyed it."

"Ah!"

A long silence; then he said:

"Princess."

"Well?"

"I don't want to seem disagreeable, but I complained once before, and you must forgive my reminding you. I—don't quite like your being so friendly with those people."

"Why not?"

"I think we discussed this fully, and you must remember my reasons. Don't imagine I wish you entirely to give them up; but you appear so very intimate——"

"We are intimate."

"Dear, I shouldn't speak unless I felt it really necessary. My own old friends never have a chance to know you, and to learn to love you——"

"Gerald."

"Yes."

"I really can't stand any more. I won't be bothered about my friends. So, for the future, please let me alone about them. And I

don't care if yours don't love me. I can't make friends quickly, and if they haven't the sense——”

“Please, stop, Princess; I would rather not hear any more.”

Perhaps then there came over him, as there had perhaps done before, a strange feeling of having ruined something in saving something else. If there did, he showed nothing, but sat in his corner as quiet and unmoved as when he had smiled and listened in the old days of the “Poet's Audience.”

For the great right, he was the sort of man to bear the little wrong. Not to commit it, but to suffer it, and to cover the consequences in his own person, and deceive himself never in the transaction.

“I should like to go to Sandown with the Digbys,” said the Princess, in her cold, proud voice.

“Princess, I forbid you.”

“And I refuse——”

“What, dear?”

“I shall go.”

Silence again. They drew up to the door, and he quietly handed her out, with his grey eyes so sad and wistful in expression that they startled her. But as he helped her off with her wraps, her cold face grew colder, and her lips more firmly set.

"I have never been to any races in my life," she said.

He did not answer.

"Did you hear what I said, Gerald?"

"Princess, I have told you what I wish; it is no use discussing it all over again."

"I thought," cried the girl, growing angry, and childish in her anger, "I thought you loved me."

He turned, and looked round at her quickly.

"When," he said, "did I ever tell you that?"

And the Princess, ashamed and miserable, crept upstairs, with a vague sense of admiring what most angered her, and of liking what she would, as a rule, have most disliked.

And the wretched days that followed were torture to them both. Singleton was always kind, always courteous and considerate, but the

Princess, thwarted by him for the first time, was proud and unforgiving. If he gathered her roses, she dropped them carelessly, or let them wither without water. If he spoke, she pretended not to hear, or answered so coldly and so proudly that he ceased talking, and was silent for the rest of the time they spent together.

And all through those days the great house was kept going. The servants ran hither and thither, the gardens were freshly arranged, and the most expensive roses and rare orchids cultivated and reared to please the Princess. Her room was altered, her books freshly covered in the richest bindings, her little boudoir kept full of the choicest plants and the most gorgeous bowls of roses. Everywhere his care and kindness lapped her round, and everywhere she faced it coldly, almost angry that the giver had the right to give. And the real owner of the great house and the beautiful grounds walked sadly through the park with his dogs by his side, while the Princess sat indoors with the bright fire in her gay little boudoir, and the warm curtains

drawn to keep out the cold. And if even those same curtains were not drawn, no stray glance noticed the grave owner, as his slim figure moved among the trees, for the Princess sat cold and immovable, with the pen between her white fingers, unable to write a word.

And one day, when the first sunshine shone through the snow-clouds and lit the frosty trees, and touched with its glittering fingers the snow-covered ground, the owner of the great place knocked at the door of his wife's boudoir, and was admitted.

She was sitting close to the fire, but just where the rays of that same bright sunshine shone on her, bringing out the rich glossiness of her dark hair, and lighting her dark eyes, just as it had done when she stood in the golden glory of its setting so many months ago, with the Poet by her side. Singleton drew near, and resting her arms on the back of her chair bent over her and spoke.

"I have brought my wife a present."

"Thank you."

She did not move or look round ; the superb

curve of her red lips tightened, as it were, into a straight line.

"I want you, dear, to be very pleased, because I—I have so wished to please you with it."

"You are very kind."

But she still made no movement, save the slight one of opening those same lips a hair's breadth to drop the words out like frozen icicles, almost cutting the warm air.

"It is a little book of poems," continued Singleton.

"Poems!"

Heaven knows, she tried to keep her thoughts from the subject of poems and poem-writers. As it was, a faint blush crept into her cheeks, and the brightness of her eyes seemed dimmed.

Oh! old romances, why do they cling to us? Why does the old foolishness and the old mad dreaming seem the happiest part of our lives? It went with our youth, and our reckless laughter, and we imagine, somehow, it may come again with the last rest; and all through life we cherish the remembrance of it, and hide it, and weep over it, as if we were still as foolish as in those same

young days. And we forget—oh, how many of us forget!—the restlessness and the misery, and the tears it cost us then ; and afterwards we are just as young over our old romances, and we keep and love them as we kept our childish toys, so long after they were worn out and useless.

“ Yes, poems,” repeated the man. “ And I— I want you to like them, Princess.”

“ Give them to me,” she said.

The icicles were hanging from the window ledge outside ; the trees were converted into fairy trees by them. Inside the little fire blinked and brightened, throwing its warm glow into the man’s earnest face. But the little fire did not love the Princess ; she was more in sympathy with the cold, cold icicles outside.

He put a small white book into her hands ; the lettering was silver.

“ My Princess ! ” she read, and then sat so very still, that the man wondered, but waited for her to speak.

“ Dedicated to the Poet’s Audience,” she read, and again sat very white and still, while the icicles glistened in the sunlight outside.



"Do you like it?" asked the man.

She read on silently.

"Yes," she answered, and her voice was constrained and hard.

"It is a justification," said her husband.

She rose suddenly, facing his grave face, with the new light in it, of hope, and something more than hope, which she could not understand.

"Oh, you are right; you understand. It is a justification."

But he did not understand.

"Yes, dear; you all judged a little hardly; I—at least I used to feel so. And I thought it would please you——"

"You knew it would."

A great glow of happiness leapt into his face; the little fire blinked and brightened too.

"Dear, will you let it draw us a little nearer? Will you let it?—— Princess, what is the matter?"

Oh, those icicles outside. Inside she had frozen, and was still more like them—a white statue with flashing eyes.

"*His* justification bring me nearer to *you*? How can it do that?"

And the fire recognised the man no longer; he was as white as the soft falling snow.

"God," he said, "be merciful." But he spoke below his breath, and the woman's lips curled as she heard him.

"Are you afraid to own what you know? I loved him then; I loved him when I consented to marry you. You knew that. I told you. I have tried to forget him since. This book, which is the one small ray of comfort I can rob all the misery of, you look upon as means of bringing me nearer you. Better far you had never brought it!"

"Better far!" echoed the man.

"If I have this poor comfort in his book, I do not wrong you by it. I shall do my duty none the less; only having given it to me—leave me with it. Not one disloyal thought to your friendship shall intervene—only I *must* feel it is mine, as it is—Gerald."

"Yes. Only I do not think, dear, you quite understand. Are you quite certain who wrote it?"

"Certain? You are peculiarly stupid to-day."

But the warm little fire or the sun outside was thawing those icicles, and they dropped vain tears in the snow beneath. The Princess alone remained frozen and cold.

"Have you no other friend, dear, who can write at all?"

"No one, except yourself, and you——"

Oh, the scorn in that small word, "you"! It whitened the man's face, and turned him cold. And in the midst of it, a forgotten speech ran in the girl's ear.

"He wrote a poem full of human sympathy and human pain——" and, remembering, she laughed aloud, with the little book pressed against her heart, and her scornful eyes on her husband.

The man kept his face a little averted, and his head was bowed. Perhaps whatever he had hoped was painful to lose sight of, to relinquish altogether. Perhaps a sense of a great wrong somewhere, in place of the great right he had meant and dreamed of—overcame him. He

passed his firm, brown hand wearily over his brow and looked sadly at the girl's proud face.

"I think," he said, "you will never understand."

"Understand what?"

"The mistake of my life, Princess," he answered quietly, "which, God knows, I thought for the best."

And then in the face of her astonishment and curling lips, he turned and left the room.

And the Princess was alone with the book and the warm little fire. But the icicles outside had gone; perhaps she had stolen all the cold from them and left them with none.

And the winter gave place to the first days of early spring, when the park woke up suddenly, putting on its summer dress of rich green, and covering the grass with buttercups and daisies. In those days Alice Digby drove over and bore off the Princess for a week's gaiety at her own home. She smiled in her pretty brilliant way at Gerald, but Gerald did not smile at her. She coaxed and worried, but Gerald remained unmoved. He neither

expressed his approval or told his wife not to go. He stood by as an outsider might have done and studied her proud face.

And just as the two were driving away together, the Princess looked back, "Oh, Gerald," she cried, and her face grew so troubled that he went with more than his usual courtesy close to the carriage door to speak to her.

"Gerald. That little book you gave me. I forgot. If you would be so kind as to get it for me. It is on the boudoir table."

But he turned away and told one of the men standing near to call her maid, and so, raising his hat, left them, disappearing among the great trees, which had known him from boyhood, with the old wistful expression and compressed mouth.

And the Princess stepped into a whirl of amusements and gaiety that took her breath away. The merry journalist was there, and ready to make much of her, a quaint, amusing artist, three or four clever Americans, and some officers who were one and all supposed to be in love with Alice. The house was so merry

altogether, so full of frolic and noise from morning till night, that the Princess grew to long for her own quiet home with its stately park and orderly servants. New people came down from town to spend the day, and expected the Princess to amuse them and keep up an incessant supply of small talk ; new people asked her impertinent questions and wondered where she got her dresses from. New men finding her there without her husband, attempted to carry on little frivolous flirtations, and hinted at sympathising with what they knew nothing about. New women invaded her room, lectured her maid, admired her hair, and offered her washes for the face. New mammas gave her good advice and confided their woes, imaginary or otherwise, to her inattentive ears. New papas called her "my dear," and said they hoped her husband was a good fellow, because he must, to start with, have been a rascal to have married her before anyone else had had the chance. And the Princess became something new, too. Her manner became new, her speeches meaningless, her airs, walk, and style seemed to be altering, and

for the worse. It was not that she could ever be anything else but dignified and proud, but that she was carried along with the rest in the rush, and did her best to enjoy it.

The week lengthened to an invitation for a week more, and she settled to drive home for something she had forgotten, when, to her surprise, Alice Digby, in a new Parisian dress, with a new batch of admirers, down from London the night before, offered to accompany her.

"They might mope and be forlorn," the girl said, when they remonstrated with her. "The Beauty must not be allowed to go alone, and she never saw her now, or had her for a minute to herself."

So the Princess, who gathered new nick-names wherever she went, drove away with the little American by her side.

Alice rattled on as usual for a little while, and then grew suddenly silent.

"Are you tired, dear?" asked the Princess.

"No, nor sick."

"Then what is the matter?"

The Princess was feeling so very miserable

herself, for no reason so far as she could tell that she was also feeling kinder and more sympathetic towards other people.

"I don't know," was the answer, in a dull voice.

"Alice, dear, you are always so bright."

"So I am. But sometimes now it needs keeping up, and I think if I hadn't seen the chance of coming with you, and being for a moment quiet, I should have died with the effort."

"My dear, dear Alice," said the Princess again, "what is the matter?"

"Nothing, but I feel lonesome, somehow, among all these people. I'd rather be home again, and rush round there if I want to rush round. I'll tell you what it is, if you like; you're softer to-day, somehow, than usual."

The Princess did not answer, but she took the neatly-gloved little hand in her own, and pressed it.

"I've told no one, and didn't mean to, but it chokes me sometimes. I'll tell you how it was. You call me bright; well, I used to be; merry



wasn't the word, and I just jumped for joy when they said I should come to Europe and have a regular jolly time. I guess I did at first, and no American girl ever loved it as I did. Well, we went to Italy and saw all the sights, and, on the way back, stopped for a good long spell in Paris."

"Yes," said the Princess, for the girl waited, and her head dropped. Such a bright, defiant little head it was usually, so ready to toss and be indignant.

"In Paris—well, in Paris I just enjoyed myself. We had lots of friends there. I loved going out, and was having the loveliest time in the world when I met——"

"Yes, yes, dear, I understand."

"That's not all, Beauty. He was clever, and I am only smart; he was real handsome, and knew how to make folks love him: I don't. We went out drivng together. Mamma didn't say 'No,' it being the custom at home, but he knew pretty well it wasn't there. Well, people talked. I let them talk. I—I loved him, so it didn't matter. And I changed fearfully. I didn't feel

a bit as light-hearted and jolly, somehow, but I just worshipped him. And he taught me all sorts of things, and was, oh, so clever, and knew just how to manage people."

Another pause.

Every bird in the trees above them was singing; every leaf and flower seemed full of life and happiness. Only the bright little American bent her head and cried.

"One day he came and said he was going. I didn't mind, knowing we were going soon, too. He said pleasant times had to end some day, and mamma went out of the room. He—well, he pretended to be very miserable and he kissed me."

She bit her lips and flushed with a strange mixture of pride and misery, not unlike the Princess in the old days.

Her voice had changed when she went on.

"I came to London and met him once. He didn't speak to me. He had a lady with him they told me was his wife—had been for nearly a year."

Silence again. The Princess was very white.

"I hate that man," she said.

"I guess a lot of men are like him," answered the American.

"Oh, no, no."

"Well, you're married to an exception, so it's different. But I do grow lonesome sometimes; it is so hard to be young when you feel old: so hard to laugh when you'd give your life to cry. It's a funny life."

And Alice Digby suddenly smoothed some imaginary creases in her pretty dress and sat upright.

"I'm not going to mope any more. I'd just like to say I feel kind of better for having told you, Beauty. No one will ever play with you, I reckon; you're too proud and too cute to be taken in. But I'm glad I told you anyhow. Now, let's pull some of the people to pieces, or tell each other the first nonsense that comes into our heads. I want to laugh."

And she did laugh, very brightly and heartily, so that they reached the Hall in high good humour, and descended to find its owner gone.

The housekeeper thought, of course, the Princess knew.

"Mr. Singleton had left for London the day after she had gone herself. Would she come in?"

And she went in, to find it all so strange without him, that something smote her with a sudden dread, and something else, perhaps Alice's story, made the tears come into her eyes for a moment.

"I tell you what, Beauty, it's real lonesome here without your husband. Feels sort of deserted, don't it?"

"Yes, yes."

"Show me the orchids, will you, Beauty?"

Another instance of his care and love for her. Every flower showed it; every nook and corner in the great house spoke of it; but, without him there, seemed to have lost their value.

"Let's go home," said the little American, after a time.

And so home they went, to sing and laugh as if there were no troubles in the world, only little Alice Digby feeling "lonesome" still, cried

herself to sleep that night, and the "Beauty" paced her room up and down, up and down, till the dawn crept in at the windows and sent her tearless to bed.

And the great house frowned on the park with its fine old trees, and the park frowned back at the great house, ownerless and desolate.

## CHAPTER V.

“MY WHOLE LIFE TO SHOW MY GRATITUDE.”

To be the gayest among the number of gay people there, to be the brightest, the prettiest, and the wittiest, where everyone appeared to be bright, tried to be pretty, and wished to be witty ; to be the favourite among favourites, to have a crowd round her, and an escort wherever she went, was the fate of the little American at the races. She was society's latest toy ; society's latest amusement ; society's latest admiration.

She laughed, chatted, flirted, and went where she would, and with her on that special spring day, went a tall, graceful figure, with a white, earnest face and beautiful eyes, that people stared at, and wondered about, and the little American called “Beauty.”

There were so many lords waiting to be introduced to little Miss Digby, and so many baronets

whispering by her side, and so many other distinguished ladies and gentlemen, who had heard of her, and so wanted to know her, that it became a little confusing.

The Princess heard a well-known voice amid the many voices.

"Come and be introduced to a very clever friend of mine, Mrs. Singleton," it said, and the witty journalist was by her side, hurrying her away from her friends, to where another crowd surrounded another lion of the day; this time a crowd chiefly composed of women. The Princess had been enjoying herself—the novelty of the scene, the beauty of the day, the pretty faces and pretty dresses, everything amused and interested her. She pushed her way through the crowd with the journalist, and her face was brighter and less proud than usual.

"Let me introduce you," began her friend, and stopped, for the Princess was suddenly face to face with—the Poet!

"Oh, you know each other!" he said, and seeing that in some way he had made a mistake, hurried away in fear of the consequences.

And in the bright racecourse, with the crowds round them, they met again: the Poet after the first moment smiling and amused; the Princess very white and trembling.

He held out his hand; she put hers in it, and unseen they stood hand in hand for a second.

"I—I did not know," began the girl, hastily drawing back.

"No, or you would not have come."

"Or I should not have come," she repeated.

"How goes the world with you, dear," he asked very gently.

And she, remembering the little white book, answered gently, too—

"Very well. And you?"

"Princess, I once made a great mistake."

And he only said it to see her blush and start, to see her as of old, trembling beneath his glance, held by his magnetic eyes, and tyrannised over by those red, red lips.

"Mistake?" she breathed faintly.

"You know what I mean. I need not tell you."

And she hung her head frightened.



They were together for so short a time. But it was long enough for the Poet to fancy he read a confession in her white face and trembling lips. Long enough for his grey eyes to hold hers prisoner, and to teach her the guilt there might be for her yet in the world if she lingered there. Long enough for the old triumph to creep into those same eyes, and for him to moisten his red, lower lip; and long enough for her, in raising her head to face two other eyes, from the other side of the course, belonging to a sallow face and an evil smile. And to cry out, in a paroxysm of her old terror—

“My God! my God! He has seen us!”

The Poet looked round smiling.

“Who?” he said. “Oh that fellow; why, it’s the foreign gentleman.”

But he spoke to the air. The Princess was gone; nor did he see her again that day.

And if she begged to be allowed to return by the first train, Alice Digby, in spite of her success, was ready; if she hurried away with her white face full of a new and yet an old terror, Alice Digby, in her pretty costume and with her crowd

of admirers, did the same. And though they laughed as merrily on their return journey, and laughed again through the long evening, the Princess sought her room afterwards, to pace, as once before, up and down till the light crept in, to find her face drawn and white ; and little Alice Digby, as if in sympathy, sobbed herself to sleep.

And the great house welcomed back the Princess on the following day, with the same sombre walls and old gardens.

On the hall table as she passed she noticed a letter in a thin, foreign handwriting, directed to her husband, and she half-stopped, and trembled from head to foot.

And when dinner came, and he entered with it unopened in his hand, she trembled still more and could scarcely speak.

He gave no other greeting than a quiet—

"Well, Princess?"

"You—you are well?" she said, with her eyes on the letter.

"Oh, yes." He tore open the envelope as he sat down.

The Princess sprang to her feet.

"Gerald!" she said.

And as he looked up astonished, she crimsoned and sat down again. If she had been in her own old room at home she might have known how to act. The great dining-room and the men waiting chilled her. Her pride was in keeping with them; but for the moment her pride was gone. How she got through the courses, smiled, and kept up a kind of conversation, she never knew. The effort was torture to her. In the middle Gerald rose, and walking to the window tore the letter into pieces and flung it to the winds. By the time the men had gone she had recovered, and when he spoke was crushing the red strawberries between her firm white fingers with her lips set as if she were killing—and loving the act—so many foreign gentlemen with each piece of fruit.

"An old friend of mine," said Gerald, "who is going round the world in his yacht, wishes me to go with him."

"Of course," said the Princess coldly, "you will not go. You haven't asked me how I enjoyed my visit."

"I do not wish to hear."

"You never forbade me to go."

"I was not aware——" and his cold tones matched hers as he spoke, "that you asked my permission."

The Princess flushed, and let the strawberries drop from her fingers.

She looked across at the slim figure and grave face with a new careworn look upon it, and the dark hair already turned grey at the temples. He crossed one leg over the other, having previously pushed his chair a little way from the table, and glanced at the dark oak panelling of the walls as if they alone existed in the room.

"I—I am glad to be home again," said the Princess, with a rush of pity and shame mingled with her wonder.

But he never answered, and the darkness creeping through the park took possession of the room, so that the girl leant forward, the better to see his face, and spoke again :

"Gerald, are you ill ?"

"No."

J

"I think you must be very tired then."

"I—— Perhaps I am rather tired."

There was a long silence ; he never moved or looked towards her, while she strained her eyes to see the grave face, and noted the thinness of the dark figure.

"You are so thin now," she said.

"I was never anything else. There is nothing the matter with me: probably you never noticed before."

She played with a fork on the table in a nervous manner, while wondering at herself.

"Gerald, do talk!" she said at last.

"Very well. I didn't mean to bother you till to-morrow. But I am going away."

"Away!"

The fork fell with a clatter to the ground, and he came round the room with his old courtesy to find it for her. In doing so their hands touched, and he found to his astonishment that she was icy cold.

"Yes, away," he repeated, as he resumed his seat. "I think it will be better for both of us."

"How?"

"There is surely no need to ask that. Are you so happy as we are?"

"I——"

"I shall go with this friend yachting, and shall arrange——"

"How long?"

"How long what?"

"How long will you be away?"

"Oh, a year or more. Probably I shall stay and travel in Asia. I have always wished to see India and Persia."

"India—Persia?"

"You see, I have thought of it for some time. It is no use our trying to go on as we are any longer. It was my mistake. I am not blaming you. I ought to have known, and yet in those days——" He broke off and fancied she spoke. "What did you say, Princess?"

"I—— didn't speak."

"You see, you are not even obedient, and I doing my best to please you, can somehow never manage it. Probably that is my own fault, but I do not mean to stay and worry over it any more. It has all been so wretchedly wrong from the beginning."

"Wrong?"

"Nothing," he continued, "can ever make what is wrong, right. And I had no right to let you try and love me, knowing you never could. If I was vain enough once, your evident contempt ought to have been sufficient to show me the hopelessness of it. Because I have been a fool, I do not blame you. Through it all, I have no blame for you, dear; never think that. Only I cannot bear it any more."

The Princess felt as if she and the darkness were being tortured by the kind, grave voice from the other end of the room.

"I shall leave you," he continued, "a sufficient allowance."

"Like your housekeeper."

"Like my housekeeper. I trust you will do your duty as well."

"Gerald!"

"Well?"

"You are cruel."

"I did not mean to be. I beg your pardon Princess. I am grown suddenly very

hard. When I have been away some time I shall write and ask you to forgive me for what I have said to-night."

"Why must you go?"

"I have told you once. I shall make all the arrangements as soon as possible, and be off in a fortnight. Have you anything to say?"

"No, no."

"Very well, then, that is settled. I think, dear, we shall be much happier apart."

"Yes, yes."

"You can be with your gay friends then without vexing me, for I shall not know, and I——"

"Can enjoy yourself."

"Enjoy myself—where in all the world? But this is nonsense. I am going to have a smoke in the garden."

"Gerald."

He could see nothing in the dark but the crouching figure and white face.

"Well?" he said.

"Nothing. Good-night."

"Good-night. Sleep well."

And only the darkness knew, as it clouded



the long dining-room, how she laid her head down on her hands and cried, and only the moon peeping in through her bedroom windows saw her praying and weeping long after the rest were in bed and asleep.

In the morning she went first into his study, and began speaking hurriedly, with a white face and nervous, trembling hands.

"I don't want you to go, Gerald," she said.

"I have told you," he answered, rising and facing her, "I have settled to go."

"But I ask you to stay."

"And I refuse. You have not made my home so charming——"

"Don't." She covered her face with her hands and shrunk away as if he had struck her.

"Heaven knows I do not mean that. Do you want to drive me mad, Princess? Once for all, I am going. Your regard for a book which you imagine to be written——"

"Hush, hush; don't insult me."

"Your whole life here has insulted me. You heed nothing I say; you set my wishes at

defiance. If I were a craven fool, I should stay and bear it—if I thought it right, I should stay; as it is I think it wrong, and go."

She turned and left the room, with her hands clasped together as if she suffered and could not cry out. The morning sunlight blinded her. She staggered into the breakfast-room and found a telegram on her plate. It had only just come, they told her. She was humiliated, angry, and very miserable as she took it up, shaken by want of sleep; and the great place had never looked so beautiful, the gardens never so gay, the sunlight never so bright and caressing, when the Princess bit her lips and tore the red cover open.

The room was empty when Singleton entered it, and he rode off to the nearest town directly he had finished breakfast. When he returned they handed him a letter, and he took it into his study and opened it.

A telegram fell to the ground. He picked it up. It was from the Poet:

"Come to me! I am ill—dying! My wife has left me! For God's sake, come!"

And then a letter from the Princess :

"I am going. You will not care, as you mean to go soon yourself. Perhaps he will want me a little. Good-bye."

And in the midst of his horror he said :

"She is still a spoilt child."

And the garden's brightness turned him dizzy to watch. We were grown for her, the roses seemed to say, just as everything thought of for her, done for her in the great house opened the wound afresh and smote him through the day.

"A lady to see you," said the butler at last, and handed him the little American's card.

"I cannot go. Stay—I had better, perhaps."

And he went to find Alice Digby a little less confident, a little frightened, in the great drawing-room.

"Where is your wife?" she asked.

"She has gone away."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

"Then it is true?"

"What is true?"

"Someone said she had gone off to London by the ten-thirty train."

"Well, that is nothing extraordinary."

"No."

After a pause the girl began again :

"I saw her myself."

"Then why didn't you say so?"

"Please, Mr. Singleton, don't be angry. I'm so wretched!"

"Sit down, Miss Digby. I beg your pardon. I'm not well to-day, and am rude and boorish into the bargain. I am very sorry."

"Oh, there, don't. I'm just mad for you. It's awful. I met her driving to the station, and she was silly—didn't know what she was saying. Oh, Mr. Singleton, how awful it is!"

"My dear Miss Digby, don't cry so. Will you come down to my den—this place is so cheerless—and then we can talk?"

And so she was soon half-hidden in Gerald's own chair, with Gerald's own footstool, close to his table.

It seemed to him, then and afterwards, as if he was hurried through the events of that day

by some unseen power. He scarcely seemed to be allowed time to think.

"I'm real sorry," sobbed the tender-hearted little American. "I do just hope it wasn't through her visiting us you had a row."

Silence, and the bright sunlight flooding the little room, touching his foils and his guns, and lighting the brightness of the little American's hair. The old room in which he had spent half his boyhood, and where he had suffered and struggled in later years.

"My dear child, it is through no fault of yours. We married under very strange circumstances. You are so kind, I will tell you how it was."

And in a few words the girl understood, and cried the more.

"I always said you were a real lovely man. Oh, Mr. Singleton, I am sorry!"

Then she suddenly sprang to her feet.

"I'll go after her. I will find her and bring her back."

But he laid a detaining hand on her arm.

"You could do no good, dear. You are very

kind. Besides, I would not have her back again."

And the girl started, and looked up into his set face, to find that he had grown suddenly very stern and grave.

"Mr. Singleton, if I've been in any way to blame, tempted her to disobey you, say you forgive me."

"God knows I do, child."

"Thank you, thank you. And I—I'll go now. Only you said something about going away soon. Give her another chance."

"Never. Never another chance."

"May I come and see you again?"

Oh, the mockery of the warm summer day and the birds singing outside!

"No, better not, dear. I shall remember you always, remember your kindness. You prevent me feeling—a devil."

"I wish I was your sister or something, then you'd let me come."

But he shook his head.

"No; no one can help me. My dear child, I am most grateful."

And, as he led her to the door, he stooped and took the young face between his hands.

"Little Alice Digby," he said, "you are a good little girl. God bless you and help you always."

Then he stooped and kissed her brow, with its soft wreath of fluffy curls.

And the great house received him desolate, as it had received him years ago. And the day grew and lengthened till the darkness came again, to find him white and alone in the chair where little Alice Digby had nestled in the bright morning; and as the night came and found him still there, an old saying, heard somewhere, ran repeatedly through his brain :

"I will live my whole life to show my gratitude."

And he, alone and so desolate, rose suddenly and stretched out his arms as she once had done.

"Your whole life," he cried, "and this the end!"

## CHAPTER VI.

## A SOUVENIR OF THE POET'S AUDIENCE.

HE wrote that telegram when he really was not responsible for his actions."

"How do you mean?"

"He caught a chill two days ago, and was feverish and delirious; he ordered them to take it to the post. In that condition he may have fancied he was dying, but he never really was in any danger."

The doctor was a little contemptuous, a little amused.

"You are his cousin, I think you said," he continued.

"Yes."

"Of course, he would be the better for your care, and so on, but, really, he is very well looked after by the landlady, and will soon be all right. That is—Mrs. (I think you said) Singleton—if you have any duties at home."



The Princess turned very white.

"I shall just see him and then return," she said.

"Yes, I think you had better. Will you come upstairs now, then?"

And the doctor led the way.

The Poet was sitting in a chair by the window. He was flushed, and looked thin and worn, as if he had gone through a long illness, but he was the sort of man to get run down at once, and his appearance on such occasions was always deceptive.

"Ah! Princess," he said, as she entered, "I knew you would come."

The doctor turned round and faced her suddenly.

"What time shall you be going back?" he asked; "I will send my carriage for you, if you like."

"Thank you," said the girl.

The Poet laughed.

"Very kind of you, doctor, to hurry Rose away."

But he received no answer; the door was quietly opened and shut, and the two were alone.

"Come here, Princess; how white you are!"

"I am sorry," she said—the luxury in the small room striking her unpleasantly—"that you have been so ill."

"Never mind about that; come and talk to me."

"I can't stay very long——"

"You *came* to stay," sneered the Poet.

The Princess flushed.

"I thought you were dying; I find you——"

"Yes, yes; I know the rest. Do sit down."

But the girl stood where she was; a strange feeling of something missing, of something jarring, of something altered in the man struck her, and determined her to understand it before she left.

"You have made your room very pretty," she said.

"Yes; but it needs a woman to arrange things. You, my Princess, can do it for me later on."

"Where is your wife?"

"How the devil am I to know?"

"I wish you wouldn't use such language."

"I wish you would come where I can see you. Look here, Princess, where did you disappear to that day at Sandown?"

"I don't know."

"The old phrase."

But again something jarred, and she flushed indignantly.

"Come near the window," he commanded.

She went nearer, so that the glorious sunlight shone on her beautiful face and dark hair.

He stretched out his hand and touched hers.

"Dear little hands," he said.

But she shuddered, and drew back quickly. He noticed everything, but smiled as if nothing had happened.

"It is like the old days to have you near me."

The girl moved impatiently, and her eyes caught sight of a photograph on the mantelpiece.

"Alice Digby!" she exclaimed.

"Yes; do you know that nice little girl?"

"Very well; and you?"

"I met her in Paris. What's the matter, Princess?"

"Nothing. In Paris, did you say?"

"Why not in Paris? We had a 'real lovely time' together, as she would say—not having any scruples about flirting with a married man."

"She didn't know you were married."

"Really, Princess, you needn't trouble to defend her. Let us change the subject."

He was so cool, so smiling, so calmly amused, that the girl thought of him as some other man, and felt, somehow, that the Poet had died, leaving this mockery in his place.

"Where was your wife?" she demanded, "when you met Alice Digby?"

"Yachting with her father. You are not happy in your choice of subjects, Princess."

The girl felt a little sorry, and remembered the volume of poems with a rush of gratitude that showed itself in her face. The Poet smiled.

"Well, Princess?" he said.

"I have to thank you for something."

She bent forward eagerly, and laid her hand on the arm of his chair.

"Kneel down, dear," he pleaded, "and let me see your face. I have been so hungry for a sight of it."

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She obeyed, and continued eagerly :

" I mean about that book ; I have to thank you——"

She hesitated and flushed, for he watched her narrowly, with the old triumph creeping into his eyes, and moistening his lower lips.

" Go on," he said, quietly.

" It was so good of you to write it," said the girl. He seemed not to have heard her.

" Do you remember one day, when I had been very ill, you came and knelt as you are doing now, and cried, Princess ? And then you laid your head against my arm, and I told you——"

" That you loved me," broke in the girl, fiercely. " And it was a lie !"

She tried to disengage her hands, and found it useless. The Poet laughed. He leant forward, till his face almost touched hers.

" Do you love me now ? " he whispered.

Then she grew suddenly strong, and wrenching her hands free, sprang to her feet—her eyes flashing and her face flushed.

" How dare you ? " she cried.

"Pray don't get excited, child. Sit down."

There was silence for a moment, then he went on :

"Now what is this nonsense about a book?"

To his surprise she looked less angry, and spoke almost quietly.

"The book you wrote to justify—I mean those poems, called 'My Princess,'"

"My dear child, I didn't write them."

"What?"

He might have struck her, and hurt her less. She caught hold of a chair near her, and gasped for breath.

"I didn't write them, but I read them only the other day. They were dedicated to my Audience."

"Yes, yes."

"What made you imagine——"

"I don't know. I was very silly."

"You are very foolish, dear, to mind so much, unless you are acting. Can you act, Princess?"

"I am very much in earnest."

"That is right."

"Do you swear that you did not write them?" said the girl.

"What nonsense this is! Of course I didn't write them. Why should I? Besides I don't publish anonymously as a rule."

"Who can have written them?"

"How should I know?"

"Do help me to discover."

"Sit down there, and don't get so excited."

She took the seat near her, and sat with tightly-clasped hands and a troubled face, while he watched her with the growing knowledge that she was somehow beyond his power, which knowledge unmasked him. Her use was gone.

"Now who could have written it?"

"I knew at once."

"You knew?"

His grey eyes seemed to relish something; his red lips moved, and his firm fingers drummed on the arm of his chair. The sun shone brightly on her white face, and showed him plainly all she felt. He grew amused with the task before him, and the glitter in his cruel eyes resembled steel.

"Yes," he sneered, "I was not blind, as you appear to have been."

"I thought it was you."

"I was likely to write verses to my cast-off loves."

She winced and bit her lips, and he smiled again.

"Who do you think it was then?" she said, in a low, trembling voice.

He leant a little forward and tapped her chest as he spoke, so that his finger seemed to cut each word into her heart. Those same words could have cut the very air, so clear and distinct were they.

"Did it never strike you that someone other than myself might write for you, might wish to justify an act, of, shall we say inartistic journalism?—might care to write a souvenir of the Poet's Audience which gave him a wife. In fact, dear child, I think the gentleman who wrote it—was your husband!"

She fell back in the chair, white to the lips, and made no sound or movement, while he watched her, still smiling, and commenced to drum on the arm of his chair again; his cruel mouth in a line across his face, his eyes half-closed, and his head thrown back as if admiring a fine painting. The Princess seemed stunned;



she felt unable to think, unknowing of time or place. She remembered something long ago like the strange numb pain she was feeling then, and remembered her long walk through the London streets and her meeting at the end of it with her husband. She started to her feet.

"I am going back to him," she said.

"Will he be very willing to receive you now?"

And he moistened the red lower lip.

The girl staggered across the room, and then stopped; the full significance of his words burst upon her. Her face was so white and her eyes so piteous in expression that she would have melted the heart of any other man. The Poet only laughed softly to himself. She went as far as the door, which she dragged open before she spoke, then she said:

"He is as good as you are bad—as kind as you are cold and cruel. I have no fear."

"Does he love you, then?" sneered the Poet.

And at the question she fled away, as if afraid to trust herself to hear any more, and his laugh followed her down the stairs, and

seemed to her excited imagination to be following her down the crowded street, and to be still with her when she leant back in the corner of the railway carriage, faint and numb with misery.

"Oh, my God! how I am punished," she thought, and then gave up thinking about it all, from sheer terror of the pain it caused her.

It was evening when she reached the great house. There was a light in her husband's study. She went towards it, and timidly tapped at the French windows.

He did not hear, so she knocked again.

"What is it? Who is there?" said a voice.

She turned sick; he was evidently not there. His valet came to the window and threw it open.

"Where is my husband?" she said.

"He is just going up to bed. We did not know you were to return this evening, madam."

"Never mind; let me pass. I must see him at once."

And when she did see him, he turned round at her cry, and stood holding a lighted candle in his hand above her, on the stairs. His face was

very stern. He showed no surprise, no pleasure, nor anger ; he seemed turned to stone.

"Gerald," she said.

"What do you want?"

"I have come back. I——"

"You cannot——"

"Wait, wait ! Give me time to explain."

"I want no explanation."

She heard his valet in the distance shutting the door leading into the servants' hall, and felt half desperate.

"Gerald, for God's sake, listen !" she began. But he interrupted her again.

"I will hear nothing. You had better go."

"Go?"

"You have nothing to do with me. You are no longer my wife——"

She fell on her knees and clung to his hands.

"Oh," she sobbed, "you must forgive me now I have returned! Gerald, I so want to tell you. I was wrong—so unjust ! Gerald, do listen ! I misjudged you—I——"

"Enough of this. Get up at once."

"Why are you grown so hard? Oh, for God's sake, have some mercy! I am worn out—ill!"

His manner softened.

"Poor child!" he said, kindly; and she thought he was relenting.

"Oh, my husband! you will forgive——"

"I am no longer your husband. You are tired and I am sorry, as I am sorry for the poorest wretch on my estates—nothing else. You will go to your room, and to-morrow morning you will depart again, where you will. I never wish to hear of you or see you."

"Gerald, for God's sake——"

"Hush!"

He bent over her and lifted her into his arms, putting the candle down, and averting his face. He carried her so to her room and laid her on the bed. Then he turned and left, shutting the door softly behind him.

A few moments later the housekeeper brought her up something to eat, and her maid came to help her to undress.

She was too tired to think; even too tired to cry. She slept like a little child till after it

was morning, and then she woke sobbing and calling her husband's name, till she remembered where she was, and crouched under the bed-clothes ashamed.

He was out, they told her at breakfast, and had said she would need the carriage to catch the first train. "No," she told them, she would wait till the second, and later on she said the third. But if she hoped something from the delay she was disappointed, and she had to leave before he returned.

She went to an hotel in London and waited there, expecting to hear from her husband. The hotel was dark and dingy, and the leather covering to the furniture in her room, the heavy oak sideboard, the bronze ornaments on the mantelpiece were a strange contrast to her own dainty boudoir, and never ceased to remind her that she was away from home.

There are some minds that do not sink under trouble, even when that trouble is through their own clumsy mistakes or misdeeds. But the Princess was not one of these; she was too much like a spoilt child, had had her own way

too much to resign herself to the situation and think quietly over the best thing to be done. She sat by the window for hours together, listless and wretched, with a sort of stubborn indignation against fortune, which had suddenly deserted her, after heaping its treasures at her feet. Of course, she had been in the wrong! But did that mend matters? Of course, she had been blind, and cruel, and unjust, and here was remorse haunting her days, and turning her nights into long hours of wakefulness and piteous weeping. She could not be resigned at once. She could not believe that Gerald, who had borne so much, would really remain determined now. Yet every harsh word, every selfish whim gratified rose up to stab her, and tell her that he had surely borne *too* much, and could bear no more.

Old forgotten kindnesses, unheeded at the time, crept into her mind and revenged themselves. Old phrases and pet names crowded through her brain and tortured her with the contrast her lonely days presented. Old fretfulness on her part, and quiet consideration on

his, old childishness met by his smile and kindness, old fancies tolerated and indulged—they were so many fiends goading her on to despair.

Yet she fought the inclination to be stabbed by these things. Yet she struggled to defend herself and justify her conduct, for her pride suffered terribly, but gave in at last, and she saw herself as she was, and shuddered.

She had a letter from her husband's lawyer concerning the money he meant to settle on her, and she wrote begging to be allowed an interview with Gerald himself before he left England.

She waited for the answer the next day as eagerly as a child might have done. She sat at the window watching for the postman and seeing first one and then another arrive, but with no letter for her.

Presently there was a knock at the door and she, still kneeling by the window, called out, "Come in."

Something told her, something made her suddenly start to her feet and face him, and cry out passionately, lovingly :

"Gerald, Gerald, my husband!"

He closed the door and stood immovable near it. His face seemed more lined; his hair at the temples was almost white; his lips were compressed into a firmness which she dreaded to see; and he was very quiet and calm.

"Gerald," she repeated, "have I forfeited all right to your love? Have I sinned so much as that?"

"No. I told you before that I was going, you must remember—— dear."

She clutched the folds of her dress in her hands and plucked nervously at it, for she knew he spoke kindly because she looked ill, and he hated giving pain to any living thing.

"I told you," he went on, "that my life was unbearable, and then you added to my pain by your foolish little fit of temper—which is over, and which I forgive."

"If you knew how I have suffered!" Her eyes sought the ground, for what she had made *him* suffer, was so plainly written on his face that she dared not look at him, but shook from head to foot.



"You will do as I wish, now?"

"Indeed, indeed, I will. Oh, Gerald, try me."

She stole a timid glance at him, but there was no hope; she was sure of that by his dignified, quiet bearing, firm and yet kind. No lover ever looked like that, she reasoned.

"I wish you to live at the Hall in what style and how you like. I am content that you should see something of Alice Digby, if she will now be willing to see anything of you."

The Princess winced, and fell on her knees close to the arm-chair and hid her face in her hands.

"Dear, I don't wish to hurt you. I fear I have grown very hard. The world has never used me very kindly, save in the way of giving me lately plenty of money and a beautiful home."

She sobbed aloud, and he waited a moment before he continued:

"Don't imagine that I do not blame myself. I have been very foolish—have helped you to blind yourself to things you might otherwise have seen in their true light. Now shall we let

bygones be bygones, and arrange for the future?"

A ray of hope caused her to raise her head, and a fresh stab of pain shot through her heart, as he leant towards her and said :

"Give me your hands, dear, and say, 'Whatever you have done wrong I forgive, as I ask you to forgive me.'"

"Gerald ! Gerald ! how can you ! You never wronged me !"

"Say it !"

She repeated it timidly, giving him her hands, which he held in the firm brown fingers she loved, and then dropped.

"Now I sail in two days, and my lawyer can manage about money matters for us both. First, you must tell me if you care to live in the country."

"I do, indeed I do. Only the Hall will be lonely without——"

"Hush, that is all done with. Have you anything you want to ask me, anything I can do for you?"

She flung herself at his feet, crying in a

painful manner, difficult for him to see without being touched.

"Oh, forgive me all the wrong I have done you. Think as kindly of me as you can. Remember that I had been so independent before, proud and selfish before. Have some pity—have mercy——!"

"Dear, I do pity you. Rose, you must be more calm. I cannot talk if you cry so."

"Why don't you say 'Princess'? You have never once called me that——" Her sobs choked her.

"Will you be sensible, dear, and let me say 'Good-bye'? You are only making this interview painful—more painful than it need be—for us both. Come, I really must go now."

He raised her, and she stood leaning against his arm, struggling to gain some mastery over herself.

"Gerald, how long?"

"Two years; perhaps more."

"Oh, then I—may I write to you? Shall I ever hear if you are dead or alive, well or ill, in trouble or——"

"I will write."

"Soon?"

"Yes, soon."

"Can I do anything to please you while you are gone?"

He shook his head.

"You don't care if I am bad or good, reckless or——"

"Hush, you will not be bad, Princess."

"Ah, you love me a little still. Oh, say you love me a little. For God's sake, Gerald——"

"Dear, you must be more composed. Now let us say 'Good-bye.'"

"Gerald, shall you ever come back?"

"Perhaps; who can say?"

"And then?"

"And then, Princess, perhaps I may have learnt to love you again."

He turned quickly and left the room. She sank face downwards on the floor with a cry that might have brought him back had he heard it.

And so the Princess returned to the great house to wait.

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And as she and little Alice Digby pace up and down the terrace together, they never mention his name, although Alice had told of her interview with him long ago, and the Princess knows it by heart.

And the "den" is always ready for its master, and kept full of his favourite flowers, and the great house waits for him in vain.

The Princess has some grey hairs amid her black ones, but they are brought by trouble, and not by age.

The letters have become scarcer, the short brief letters that are more to her than life.

Has she not suffered enough, she thinks, and prayed enough ?

Still, she must go on praying and waiting till he shall love her again, but the time has not come yet.

# DELILAH.



## CHAPTER I.

WHICH INTRODUCES THE READER TO MR. AND  
MRS. MORGAN.

THERE was a large dinner party at the house of Mr. Randal Morgan, Liberal member for S——. The rooms were charmingly decorated with flowers and lit by electric light. His young wife, at one end of the long table, had a great author on one side of her, and a great politician on the other. She conversed brightly, almost brilliantly, with them both.

Mr. Randal Morgan himself lay down the law in his usual dogmatic way, and was attentively listened to. Some young members of his own party studied him closely. To them he personated success, and they secretly wondered

a little at it. He was not nearly as clever as "so-and-so," who had long been laid on the shelf, or as their opposite neighbour, who was never likely to rise any higher than the position of a peg for other men to lean on. Yet Randal Morgan was the coming man—supposing one first allowed that he had not already come.

It is very easy to become great when people, rightly or wrongly, believe in you, and very hard when they do not. Randal Morgan had been lucky in having people to believe in him ever since he was born. There had never before been such an intelligent baby, such a precocious boy, or such an extraordinary young man. He was young still: that is, considering the work he had done and already planned to do.

His party believed in him, just as his relations had done. He talked much in a dogmatic way, and his gigantic will swept all before it. There lay the secret of his success—his marvellous belief in himself, and his determination to make the world share his belief. The world does much as it is told, and when a man says, "I am great," it often believes him. Or rather, Society

does; and what is Society if not the world? There is always a set of discontented people who throw mud at an idol, but when did they ever get anyone to sympathise with them until the idol was overthrown?

And in one sense Randal was great. The strength of will which had raised him from a poor unknown barrister to the position he now occupied commanded respect. A year before, no one had ever heard of him. But a year before he had not met his beautiful young wife and married her. She was rich, and her father was influential. Her father believed in Randal, and to show it, he gave him his daughter, and her money with her. Through him, Randal became member for S——, and ousted the Conservative candidate. "To every man," Randal said, "are given so many chances to rise in this life. I have seized mine; most men let them go."

The house in Pont Street was new, like its master. Newly built, newly furnished, replete with the newest arrangements, stamped everywhere with new originality. And yet there is such a thing as conventional originality; and to



a certain extent Randal might be accused of that.

Randal Morgan had been ill, but he showed no signs of it. His long hard face had an appearance of frankness which was a little deceptive; he had grey eyes, and hair which was brown in colour and curling. His forehead was high, but his mouth was naturally coarse, and compressed into a hardness which gave it a queer, wrinkled appearance; his nose was large and fleshy, and he had a pleasant smile. He was a tall man, with square shoulders and a broad chest. There was something about him that reminded one of a great animal, with an animal weakness, chained and kept out of sight—some day, perhaps, to break loose and mar his colossal strength.

The young wife was a great contrast to her husband. Her features were classically regular; her expression almost ultra-refined; she was thin and graceful. Her sense of humour was a great help to her husband, and prevented him from making many a mistake, for he had never in his life been known to understand a joke.

"So you are going to take him away?" said the great author to Mrs. Morgan; "the influenza robs us of another of our celebrities for a time."

"He needs a change," answered the wife.

"But he looks well enough, and they say his speech in the House was as powerful as ever."

"But his voice is not. It breaks altogether. Oh, you may be sure," she said earnestly, "that I would not take him away from his work unless it were necessary."

Randal himself, at the other end of the table, heard what she was saying.

"You may be sure she would not," he called out gaily. "She is a perfect wife. I came back last week late from the club, to find her sitting up to copy out some notes I wanted, and——"

"Randal," pleaded the girl, "please don't."

It always seemed as if something in her husband's frankness and lack of reserve wounded her. His very strength, which she was so proud of, seemed almost brutal to her own shrinking nature.

The man opposite, on whom many leaned, was acknowledged to possess one excellent

quality: namely, tact. He had never been known to turn on a friend who sucked his brains, and seemed content to be a nobody all his life. In this instance he broke the pause which followed.

“You will not be able to speak on the C—  
Bill,” he said.

“No,” answered Randal; “that is a great grief to me; but the doctors must be obeyed. Tell me how Lawson gets on, will you? Write to me at Monte Carlo.”

“We shall never carry it,” said the politician near Mrs. Morgan. “The Government will win.”

“Morgan might have saved it,” grumbled an admirer.

“Nonsense! Lawson will do quite as well as I could.”

“You are modest,” answered the politician.

Randal smiled.

“No, that is not a fault of mine,” he said, “and never was. I am proud if I have done good work, or think I have done it, and am never ashamed to own it.”

He caught a look in his wife's face as he spoke that checked him. For the last six months she had been his good genius, and he almost worshipped her. He admired her as a being above himself—as an angel, who was almost cold and unsympathetic in her refined purity.

“Are you going to make fun of your boastful husband, Maggie?” he asked.

“No, Randal; I never make fun of you.”

The politician smiled across at the author. They had not been long married, after all, these two.

The girl turned to the politician's wife.

“You know what it is to have a husband who belongs to the country, don't you?” she said.

But the politician's wife was a nobody, whose answer was a mumble, and whose husband cherished a supreme contempt for her.

“Well,” continued Randal, “I am not one of those people who consider it necessary to say that the country is going to the dogs because they belong to the Opposition. That is a weak

confession of the weakness of one's own party. I believe in the men we are fighting with, and I believe in our power to do good work."

"We want a few more men who will ride over every obstacle like you," said someone.

"They will come," he answered. "I believe in the greatest danger a leader is always to be found, is always ready at hand, if his party have the sense to recognise him. Was there ever a great revolution without men to lead it? Men are made to perfect actions, not actions to perfect men."

"I hardly agree with you," said the author. "It is those same leaders who have forced the revolution, not perfected it."

"Pardon me; I think not. The justice and discontent of the people make the revolution; the leaders only give it voice."

"Randal," said his wife, "we ladies will leave you to your cigars."

One of Margaret Morgan's chief charms lay in her power to amuse. The women in the pretty yellow drawing-room laughed heartily at her quaint descriptions of the latest play and

the latest novel. Yet all the while the girl's ear was strained for the sound of her husband's voice, raised in angry dispute in the next room, and her heart beat violently with suppressed excitement as she imagined him victor in the argument:

It was when they were all gone, and she was sitting in her own little boudoir, the light gone from her tired eyes, and her slender figure draped in a white *peignoir*, and Randal came softly in and threw himself down on a stool at her feet, that Margaret gave way, and was her natural inpetuous self.

"Maggie," he said, "will you always be as proud of me as you are to-night?"

"That will rest with yourself, Randal. You are strong enough and have will enough to do anything."

"Don't let praise spoil me, Maggie; snub me sometimes."

"Dear," she answered, "praise can't hurt you. I hardly know what can. You must have some weakness, Randal; all men have."

"And women too, eh, little wife?"

"No, women have more than one, their weakness for their husbands being the chief."

"Thank you."

"You know your own strength so well, Randal, that others' estimation means nothing, except that it spurs you on to use that strength more. Your very frankness is the only danger; for if you have a weakness, you will let your greatest enemy know it at once."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it."

"Do you know how much you are connected with my greatness, Maggie?—how much your encouragement of what is best in me has done for me? Don't shake your head. I have a demon somewhere which you keep down."

"What if it breaks loose, Randal? And what form does it take?"

"I should shudder to tell you, dear; and you wouldn't quite understand. As long as you are near me there is no need to fear it."

"Randal, you speak in parables."

"Life's a parable, I think. Maggie, I feel as if this journey were another starting-point in my life."

"To more fame?"

"I hope so. Who can say? I hate leaving my work for so long, but my throat is worse than I thought it, and I dare not speak again, if even I stayed in England, till it is better. No one knows what I went through the other night. I didn't break down, but the nervous anticipation of such an event was almost as bad as if I had really done so."

"Poor Randal!"

"Did you like the author, Maggie?"

"No, not much; he rather bored me, if I may confess to such a thing."

"Give me a man who has done nothing if you want someone interesting. This author is bottling up all his best ideas for the press, and can't afford to waste them on you or me. For a good talker in Society, the man is best who *might* have done something and who never has, and never will. He flings all his originality on the minds of Society, and Society benefits by it. Such a man saves us from intellectual boredom."

"I believe your concentrated energies are



the secret of your power, Randal. Men try to distribute theirs over too many things nowadays."

"No, dear; my brutal determination to get what I want—my perseverance—has made me; nothing else."

"Randal, I have a lot to do in the morning, and am tired, dear."

"I am never tired."

"Well, be indulgent of the fault in your wife," said she, laughing.

"I always am. You ought to take more care than you do. You must be worn out with nursing me. I am going for this change as much for you as for me."

"I thought that," said the girl tenderly.

They had both risen, and she lifted up her face to be kissed. It was a rare action on her part, and Randal flushed with pleasure. A certain delicacy in her nature often irritated him. Caresses from his wife were rare, and she shrank a little at times from his. She was like a delicate orchid in the hands of a rough labourer. But the labourer had grown conscious of her refinement, and respected it.

She was so amusing, so brilliant, so young, and so pretty, and fate had given him this prize which other men coveted. He was lucky indeed. But the savage within the man was strong in its weakness, like the rest of him, and cried loudly for something more.

It is one of the saddest truths in life that nothing ever happens as we expect it to happen, if the thing we look forward to be something happy. Margaret Morgan smiled into the darkness before she fell asleep that night as she thought of the pleasure before her. It would be delightful to have her husband all to herself after the little she had seen of him in his public life. Their honeymoon had been so hurried that this trip to Monte Carlo might almost be part of it. Yet at Victoria the next morning they found a certain Mr. Graham, who was only too glad to meet Randal, and constitute himself their companion for the rest of the journey. He was a tall, fair young man, who had been in the army, and was out of it again owing to ill-health. He had blue eyes and a fine skin, and he spoke so much with his lips,

and had so large a tongue for the size of his mouth, that he could almost be said to lisp. Margaret did not dislike him, but she wanted Randal to herself; and the latter had a habit of clinging to these worldlings who clung to him, and of liking their admiration and companionship. The young wife was bored by the light Society nonsense Graham talked, and more vexed than she would have cared to own when she discovered he was bound to their own destination. He stayed a day in Paris because they did, and he and Randal left her in the hotel after dinner while they went to some place whose name Margaret had never heard of. She was too sensible to blame Randal, but she grieved over the death of her own cherished hopes, and was miserably tired and lonely. She had never been to the South of France before, and once past Marseilles, her delight in the richness of the scenery and blue sky, after the London fogs, also delighted Randal.

“Are you glad we came?” he asked again and again, and she answered with a bright face:

"We ought to be so happy in this lovely country, Randal."

It was not until she woke the morning after they arrived that she discovered how tired she was, and how the glorious sea and rich colouring seemed a little out of harmony with her nature. She was struck with a strange kind of dread that she should grow to hate so much loveliness, because it seemed almost more beauty than she could bear.

"It is lovely, Randal," she said, "but it is fevered loveliness. Don't you think so?"

"No, I like it. I could live here always. If I believed in a prior existence, I should think I had been a southerner, and basked with the oranges under a turquoise sky. I must persuade you to like it, Maggie."

"Don't think me ungrateful, dear. To-day, perhaps, I am too tired to see things in their right light. I shall go and rest." But resting seemed to do no good. She was hot and feverish, and her head ached. She was one of those women who rarely complain, and are brave—as indeed most women are—in bearing

pain. For this reason Randal believed her only tired, and finding at the end of the day that she wished to dine in her room, he willingly consented to her suggestion that he should accept Graham's invitation, and dine at the Métropole with him.

Once left alone, she was at liberty to leave her dinner untasted, and flinging her white wrapper round her, drag herself to the window.

It was still light, and she could see the Casino growing yellow beneath the glare of the sunset, which was almost over. People passed up and down the steps, and she tried to imagine that she could see her husband on his way to the other hotel. She was so hot and tired that her eyes ached, and the light, slight as it was, became unbearable. She went back to her bed, and called her maid. When she was undressed and left for the night, a horrible suspicion crept upon her. What if she were to fall a victim to this tiresome influenza, as her husband had done, just when she most wished to be well? The suspicion grew into a certainty as the fever increased, and with it

agonising pain in every limb. "Would Randal be very late?" she wondered. She felt so powerless without him. Ever since her marriage she had depended so childishly on him, just as he, in one way, had depended on her good judgment about his own affairs. Randal meant strength and comfort to her, and in her semi-delusion she believed him lost to her for ever because he did not return at once. Eleven struck, and she tossed from one side to the other, and cried a little because her throat was parched and sore, and she could not reach the water. She knew that she was foolishly nervous and distressed, but could hardly fight against it. She was one of those people who are brave up to a certain point, but having once passed it, collapse altogether. The strain of nursing her husband had told on her after the excitement of the last two months. For Randal's advancement had been her chief pleasure and interest, as his success was her only ambition. She was not content that he was already great; she wished him to be greater, and her faith in her husband's power was almost a religion. She had

a strong sense of the responsibility of his situation—far stronger than Randal himself, who, like many great men, had an exaggerated idea of the smallness of the obstacles he had overcome, and a vast contempt for the petty duties he was called upon to perform. The feminine importance she attached to what appeared mere nothings to him had often struck him, and led him to pay more attention to such apparent trifles himself. And in each case he had been glad of it afterwards, and gained something, however small, by it in the end.

Women might make bad politicians, from their habit of individualising things, but they are sometimes useful as politicians' wives. Napoleon owed something to Josephine.

It was when, long after the gaming-rooms had closed, and Randal softly opened the bedroom door, and Margaret started up, a thin white figure, and flung out her arms towards him, that Randal realised how unfit his weaker self, newly learnt, was to touch her whiteness.

"Randal, Randal, I am ill, and have cried so much!" she said. "I'm afraid it's that horrid

influenza. And my throat is so sore, and my head aches; in fact, Randal, I ache all over."

He folded her in his arms without a word. He did not kiss her, but he laid her down, and drawing the bedclothes round her, smoothed back the pretty soft hair from her forehead, and brought her some water to drink.

Between her and himself the devil thrust another face, seen for the first time to-night, and he felt as if in thought he had so wronged her that it were better if he never touched her or caressed her again.



## CHAPTER II.

## A DINNER PARTY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

MR. REGINALD GRAHAM could not boast of possessing much brain ; a queer kind of worldly shrewdness seemed to take the place of that article when he needed to think at all. The day after his arrival in Monte Carlo his first ambition was to "cut a dash," as he might have expressed it, or rather, to begin the career of mild wildness which he always indulged in when at Monte Carlo. Accordingly, he had no sooner dressed and bought a button-hole, because, whether they were the fashion or not, he always liked to be seen with a pink carnation, than he turned his back on the Casino, and sought a certain rose-covered villa.

A small French maid admitted him to a dainty little drawing-room, where he waited at least half-an-hour. On a side table he discovered

some glasses and some spirits, which he helped himself to. And then he sucked the nob of his stick and stared listlessly out of the window. At length the door opened and a childish-looking head peeped in.

"*Mon Dieu*—you!" the owner said, much disappointed, apparently, to judge by the tone of her voice.

"Yes, it's me. Back again, you see. Do come in, Cécile; I have seen you *en peignoir* before now."

"But you are *ennuyeux*. I thought it was Lord Chester. *Dis donc, mon ami*," she added coaxingly; "what do you want?"

"I want you to dine to-night—why—" as she emerged from the hall and closed the door—"why, how pretty you are: prettier than ever!"

"I cannot dine," she pouted; and her red lips were made for pouting, they were so well-shaped and so bright in colour.

"Oh! not alone with me: I knew that would bore you. I know an English swell whom I shall persuade to come: Randal Morgan, the politician."

"Not even an English lord; and you call him a swell?"

"He is one without the title. Franklin and Leighton will dine too. You may as well come, mademoiselle."

"I came here (she pronounced it *ere*) to be *amusée*, and your dinner will not amuse me."

"What if I promise you it shall?"

"What you want me for? *Dis!*"

"Because you are the fashion this year. Am I frank?"

"*Oui, mon ami! Enfin*, as I have nothing better to do, I will come. There, am I not good?"

"Very; you are simply charming, as you always were."

She caught up her garment, which was a mass of pink satin, and lace, and ribbons, and prepared to decamp, disclosing white lace petticoats, open-work silk stockings, and pink satin shoes, a little worn, as she did so.

"Wait; I haven't told you where we dine," cried the Englishman.

"Come for me here at seven. *Au revoir.*"

She turned as she reached the door, and shook a fat, but white, finger at him.

"And, *si je m'ennuie*, I shall detest you for ever, *je te le juré ! À ce soir !*"

Graham let himself out at the hall door, and smiled as he passed down the little garden. He found Randal easier to persuade than he expected. "A dinner such as yours will do me good," he said, "after the busy time I have been spending. I will certainly come."

"Will Mrs. Morgan mind?"

"Oh, dear, no. Good-bye till to-night."

When Randal arrived, the room seemed full, but as it was a small private room, it was easily so. There was a young man about twenty years of age, who went by the name of "Dotty" Leighton, young Franklin, his great friend, an Italian, famous for the duels he had fought and won, and a Jew money-lender, well known in London. The host was nowhere to be seen.

Randal knew everyone but the Italian and

the Jew. He greeted the two younger men, and inquired after Graham.

"He has gone to find La Roche," said young Franklin. "He will be back soon."

"No, bah Jove! that he won't!" cried Dotty. "She takes a devil of a time to dress!"

"Do you think so?" said his friend. "I think she's pretty quick—for a woman."

Randal smiled. The Italian, who was standing near the window, looked intensely bored. Randal had yet to learn that it was his habitual expression. He was a tall, graceful man, with a colourless face and small long eyes. His movements were graceful, and his hands (white, with great length of finger and a power to twist them backwards that resembled a serpent's movements) were pulling at his pale moustache. The Jew money-lender was short and stout; his head was almost completely destitute of hair; what he had was black in colour, and hung like a fringe round his shiny bald crown. His fat hands were thrust into his trousers pockets, which were hardly big enough to hold them, and his small, twinkling eyes were fixed on the Italian, as if he

respected the man whom nothing moved, and who had never yet asked the loan of a tenner from him.

The door was suddenly opened against Randal's shoulder, and a childish voice said :

"Monsieur Graham, quick, push ! I cannot open the door."

Randal turned and flung it wide open, to encounter the astonished gaze of the prettiest pair of eyes he had ever seen.

Mademoiselle Cécile la Roche was short, and a little inclined to be becomingly plump. Her figure was not good, and her neck was thick, but her head was well-shaped, and she wore her hair cut short and in close curls, which came a little down on her white forehead, just above her small nose. Her mouth was a perfect Cupid's bow ; there was great breadth between her eyes, which were large and heavily fringed with dark lashes, but the childish expression of her face was its chief charm.

She was dressed in blue of some soft material, which left her throat bare. Her sleeves reached down to the soft wrists, and her small white hands

were heavily ringed. She glanced first at one of the men, and then at the others, till her eyes had travelled all round the room, and came back again to Randal.

"*Je vous demande pardon, monsieur,*" she said. "I pushed the door—I hurt you?"

The last words were meant for a question.

"No, mademoiselle, you did not hurt me at all. Please come in."

She withdrew her eyes quickly, and glanced at the other occupants of the room again, as she entered.

"Oh, la la! oh, la la!" she cried. "I forgot you were to be here."

This was addressed to Dotty, who evidently adored her, and who sprang forward, flung himself at her feet, and kissed her hand.

"He is a little mad," said Franklin, as he greeted her himself. "Don't mind him, mademoiselle."

"Mad to love me? *Merci, monsieur!*"

"No, not that. If so, we are all mad."

"*C'est gentil.* Where am I to sit?"

"Here," said Randal sternly, and he handed her a chair next himself.

She turned her childish face towards him, and glanced up into his.

"I really forgot," said Graham, who had been speaking to the Italian. "Sit everyone where you like."

So it happened that Mlle. la Roche was between Randal and their host, while opposite to her were seated Dotty and the Italian. At the other end of the table, opposite Graham, Franklin took a seat, and the Jew was at the other side of Randal.

To begin with, Randal never spoke. He was occupied in watching his neighbour. She, in her turn, was ill at ease under his steady scrutiny, and wondered at herself for being so. She had thrown a prawn across at her ardent admirer, and as it hit the Italian instead, everyone laughed at her for not having taken better aim. She was a little snubbing to Graham and "Hail-fellow, well-met!" with the Italian. The Jew talked in a low voice to Franklin, and scarcely heeded her. The talk—as all conversation will



do in Monaco—drifted to the luck of the tables, and the fascinations of “Trente et Quarante” and “Roulette.”

“I have won this year,” La Roche announced. “I am so proud!”

“I wish I had,” cried Dotty. “Ask Moses how much I have lost. He knows, because he lent it to me to play with.”

The Jew took him at his word, glanced round with his beady eyes at the company, and said sharply :

“Two thousand, Mr. Leighton.”

A roar of laughter greeted the announcement.

“Poor Dotty!” said the only lady of the party. “I must lend you some.”

“I rarely play,” said the Italian, in French ; “but when I do, I win.”

“Play more often, then, and ask me to *déjeuner* on the winning,” said La Roche.

“I can ask you to Nice without that. Will you come to-morrow ? It is the first day of the Carnival ; we will lunch somewhere first, and after, see it together. I invite you all.”

An invitation from the Italian was so rare that they all stared. La Roche rather repented her rash speech, and feared he would give them a bad *déjeuner*. But she was mistaken; the Italian rarely entertained, because he was too poor to vie with the extravagance of the young Englishmen who were his friends, but he came of a good old family, and was proud. To have done anything less, after what the girl had said, would have been impossible.

"No, my dear fellow, we can't all trespass on your hospitality," said Graham. "Some of us will come."

"No; all. I invite you, monsieur, too."

Randal bowed. "I am here with my wife—" he stopped.

La Roche turned suddenly, and looked up into his face.

The Italian bowed in his turn.

"As you will, monsieur; but if you should change your mind, and should care to come, I shall be very much delighted to see you."

"Thank you," said Randal; and then he continued:

"I have never seen the Carnival. Is it amusing?"

"*Mais, oui !*" answered La Roche.

The Italian shook his head ; Graham laughed.

"I hardly know," he said, with his slight lisp.

"It amuses some people, and is certainly worth seeing for the first time."

Franklin said he was sure Randal would not care for it, and Dotty pronounced it great fun.

"I hope that monsieur will come and judge for himself," the Italian said ; and Randal answered he would like to do so if he could manage it.

There was for him a sort of fascination in this small dinner party. It was such a contrast to his late life ; it was so different to the usual dinners he had attended in London, where politics were talked, to the exclusion of every other subject. He felt like a boy out for a holiday, and was willing to be amused. The pretty woman at his side distinctly amused him. He liked to watch her varying expressions, liked to hear her quaint, laboured English, and was

delighted with the brightness of some of her answers to Dotty's nonsense. Yet all the time he felt a little ashamed. He felt he was, after all, a little old for the companionship of these boys, and he thought of his young wife at home, and almost wished he had not come.

The Italian, watching him, leant over the table.

"Monsieur is bored—*ennuyé*!"

"Oh, no," said Randal, startled; "certainly not."

But the Italian smiled, and Graham proposed that they should adjourn to the gaming-rooms.

Once there, he lost his companions, and wandered about alone. He did not play, but he watched some of the gamblers, especially La Roche, who was losing, and pouting like a child as each neatly arranged little heap was swept away before her eyes. He caught himself wondering about the character of this woman, wishing he knew her better, and feeling an interest in her which he could scarcely account for. There was a side to his own character

which admired beauty, even without a mind to support it, and made him curious about her.

As she glanced up from the tables and met his eyes, he could not withdraw his own, but stood fascinated, gazing at her face. Wherever she went he found himself following, for she forsook roulette for trente et quarante, and then returned again to the first room, and played there. He did not speak to her, but he stood where he could see her, and found pleasure in watching her play. As the crowd poured out of the rooms just as they closed, he found himself near Graham and the Italian, who were helping her on with her cloak.

"Shall you come to-morrow, monsieur?" she asked.

"I think so," he said, hardly knowing why he did so.

"Ah, no! You promise, but you will not come. Take care, Monsieur Graham; you will tear my sleeve."

"If I promise, I will come," Randal answered sternly, and bowing, turned away.

He went into the gardens and walked about for some time, wondering at himself. He found that he wished to go to Nice the next day, and yet was ashamed for wishing it. He felt as if his interest in this pretty Frenchwoman were an insult to Maggie, and he was angry that he felt so. He was discontented, vexed with himself, uncertain what to do, and yet certain as to what he meant to do in the end. "If Maggie knew, she would think me very weak," he thought; and in thinking it, was again ashamed, and yet determined to go on the morrow. And so on, up and down went the chances for and against it in his brain. She was so charming, this Cécile la Roche: she amused him, piqued him by her rare glances and interest in every one but himself. He, Randal Morgan, seemed nobody in her childish eyes, and he wished to show her he was someone. And yet, and yet—surely such a wish was unworthy of his better nature. What a night! How warm and delicious! The scent of the roses came to him as he walked; the beauty of the stars above the mountains astonished him. What a lovely country!—a

country to love in, to amuse himself in : a country with which this woman, seen for the first time to-night, seemed in keeping. And was his own nature altogether at variance with it ? Again the vexed feeling came to him that he had no right to think of her, to remember her voice, her actions, and her smile. And then he swore under his breath, and turned his footsteps towards the hotel, full of remorse for he knew not what, to find his wife ill, as we have described.

All night long he tossed and thought, till near morning he fell into a troubled sleep. He woke late, but having been accustomed to do with very little sleep, he was as fresh and well as usual. He sent for the English doctor, who told him his wife had taken the epidemic rather badly, and prescribed the usual remedies.

"Maggie," he said, "you must try and get to sleep after taking that anti-pyrine. I really think I am not much use to you here."

"No, dear. Go out, if you want to. Take a walk before *déjeuner*. It is a lovely day."

"Graham's Italian friend asked me to go

to Nice and lunch with him. Would it matter, Maggie?—as you really mustn't talk with your throat as it is, and you will be sleeping half the time."

The girl turned restlessly till her face was out of sight, and then two tears rolled down her flushed cheeks. She was depressed and wanted her husband badly, but as he went so far as to suggest leaving her, she was too proud to beg him to stay.

"Yes, go, dear," she said; "go."

"You are sure you will not be lonely?"

"No."

He went back and touched her pretty hair, streaming in disorder over the pillow.

"Good-bye, dear," he said.

"Good-bye, Randal. Isn't it the Carnival to-day?"

"Yes, dear."

As he left the room she buried her face in the pillow and burst into passionate crying, which seemed to increase the fever and left her exhausted, so that at length, sobbing now and then, she fell into a troubled sleep.



Randal met his friends on the steps of the Casino. Dotty was linked arm - in - arm with Graham, who, however, was known as "Weggie" among his intimates. Franklin explained that they were all to drive off in a few minutes, but that perhaps it would be just as well if he went to find La Roche, who had not yet left her villa. Dotty, overhearing, volunteered to go himself, and his friend good-naturedly gave in, and let him do so. "Weggie" sauntered up, and with his peculiar way of talking, which was almost a lisp, conversed for a few moments. When the Jew appeared, Franklin turned to Randal.

"Will you drive on with me?" he said. "It is no use waiting for the others; and, by-the-bye, Reggie, follow us with Moses; La Roche and Dotty can come on together. I told him we wouldn't wait for them if they were long."

Randal sprang into one of the open two-horse vehicles common to Monte Carlo, and he and Franklin were soon rattling down the Condamine at a break-neck pace.

Randal was not bored, as he expected to be, during an hour's drive with his companion.

Franklin was thirty years of age, and knew the world. Some of his caustic remarks delighted Randal, and they became excellent friends before they reached Nice. They alighted at the restaurant and found the Italian waiting for them, with three other men and two ladies. He had done things well. They had a long, cool, private room, with the table a mass of roses and Parma violets. Randal knew two of the men, and was introduced to Lord Chester, but he chose to converse with his host, and was struck with the good breeding and courteous manner that he found were his chief characteristics. At the end of the conversation, when the rest of the party were found approaching, the Italian smiled a little sadly.

“Monsieur interests me,” he said. “I trust we may meet often.”

“You cannot wish it more than I do,” said Randal frankly; and he turned on his heel, so that he had his back to La Roche as she entered the room. There were such merry greetings exchanged, and such noisy laughter, that they were seated at table before he was conscious of

it. And the Italian called to him to take a chair near his own.

"I meant to have placed you otherwise," he said in a low voice, "but monsieur manages his own business best."

So saying, he glanced through his half-closed eyes at La Roche, who was at the far end of the table on the opposite side.

Randal smiled and followed his glance. She was dressed in a cream lace costume, simply made, and fitting her to perfection. She wore on her head a sort of glorified sun-bonnet, made of straw and covered with hawthorn.

Her mouth was pursed up, and she drummed with her ring-covered fingers on the table. Randal was vexed at not being near her, while she was furious with him for not having waited at the Casino till she arrived. Dotty had bored her on the way to Nice, especially as she had expected to take the same drive in Randal's company.

She was struck with the fact that all the men seemed to consider Randal a great person, and treated him as such. She had never known the

Italian show respect for any other opinion than his own before. The lunch was a merry one; the other ladies were too noisy for Randal's taste, but somehow he was contented to watch the childish face and pouting mouth from a distance, because he had begun to guess the reason of her displeasure.

"I have never been so snubbed in my life!" cried Lord Chester. "Dotty, have you?"

"No, hang it all! What have I done, mademoiselle?"

"Bored me all the way from Monaco. Isn't that enough?"

"Oh, oh!" said Reggie. "You are in for it, Dotty!"

Randal smiled. The Italian smiled, and leant a little forward to whisper:

"She is put out."

"Apparently."

"She is sure to be surrounded by these young—hum—men on the stand, but she shall drive home with the gentleman she wished to come with. I shall manage it."

Randal flushed. "Pray don't bother to arrange anything for me," he said.

"For you?" The Italian smiled again and half opened his eyes. "For you—oh, dear, no, monsieur, for *her*!"

There was a pause.

Randal might almost have done for the part of Faust at the time, and certainly the Italian was uncommonly like the usual "make-up" for Mephistopheles.

The rest of the lunch was noisy, and the conversation frivolous.

The Carnival bored Randal. The everlasting masks and vast erections, with noisy musical instruments and ill-dressed men and women screaming at the top of their voices, made his head ache. He secretly wondered at the childishness of a nation which could be amused at such things. La Roche was surrounded by a crowd, and he could not even see her from where he sat.

Near the end of the day the Italian suddenly faced him, with the girl in question hanging on his arm.

"Here is mademoiselle, who is tired and wishes to get back to Monaco, as she means to return here for the ball to-night. I suppose you are not going yet, but I fancied you said you wished to be off early."

"I do. I must get back. Can I take you with me, mademoiselle?"

"Yes," she answered, and dropped the Italian's arm.

Randal drew her tiny hand through his, and turned to go.

"Be quick!" said the Italian. "All your admirers will be furious if they find you going."

La Roche made no answer, but she let Randal hurry her along. She was timidly searching his face, with her great eyes, and wondering if this man were really so great and strong as he was said to be.

He wrapped her up in her long dark cloak, helped her into the carriage, tucked the rug round her, and then took his seat. They had difficulty at first in making their way through the streets, which were full of country people, come by train to see the Carnival, and of

quaintly-dressed figures in masks and dominoes. Randal did not speak, so she began :

“Do you come to the ball to-night, monsieur ?” she asked timidly.

“No. Why do you go ?”

“To amuse myself.”

“Ah !”

“After all,” he thought, “what had it to do with him ?”

“If you have never been to one of these balls,” she said, “why do you not come, monsieur ?”

“Because, mademoiselle, it would *not* amuse me.”

“Oh, pardon ! I forgot. You are so grave and serious. How foolish and frivolous we must all seem to you ! Do we, monsieur ?”

“Oh, no, no !” Randal answered, and stole a glance at the pretty childish face, and sighed.

There was a glorious sunset over the blue sea : it changed the blue into silver, and fell on the whiteness of Monaco in the distance, and turned the palace yellow and red. It shone on the delicate green of the trees and the deep

blackness of the pines. It lit up the pink whiteness of the almond blossom, and showed the foliage of the aloes and cactus sharp against the sky. It was behind the carriage, and illuminated everything before them in a yellow glow. The road was deserted, as every one was away at Nice. La Roche lay with her head back against the cushions of the carriage, her hat off and in her hand. There was the same babyish look about her face, the same softness about her skin, the same pouting of the perfect mouth; but her eyelids drooped over her large eyes as if she were tired, and she scarcely glanced at the man by her side. For all that, she knew he was watching her, and she was content not to bore him with any *banales* phrases, but to let him picture her as he wished to picture her, unspoilt by any mistake on her own part.

The heavy beauty of the day seemed strangely in keeping, the scent of the mimosa was blown into their faces by the lightest of breezes, below the sea covered the brown rocks, and showed the strangest colouring through its clear water. There were streaks of purple and streaks of



green intermingling and parting again, till nearer land it was brown like the rocks. They drove on in silence, catching glimpses of the prettiest pictures, with Monaco in the distance, with the pine-trees as frames, and the sea below. It was all beautiful, all suggestive of ease and pleasure. Randal felt content to glide on and forget everything but the present. Tiny smiles played about the dimples near Cécile's mouth, as if she, too, were content with something. The man lay back and watched her, and she looked at Monaco through her half-closed lids as if she were wholly unconscious of his admiration. When in life had Cécile ever been unconscious of anything that concerned herself, and yet people, as a rule, were taken in by her childish expression, and believed her as innocent as she looked. There was a strange fascination for most men in her winning manner and habit of glancing up as if for protection into their faces, with her lower lip drawn slightly under the upper, and her eyes entreating for—they knew not what. She had, in truth, something that would always remain childish in her nature. She was impetuous,

reckless of consequences, and wilful. She either loved or hated, and knew no middle course. She cried easily, and often at the slightest things; she had no command over herself, and gave way to the fancy of the moment, if it were good or bad. She had never been taught to control herself, and was not likely to learn now. Yet, in spite of a violent temper, she had a kind heart; and in the old circus days, when she had been poor and unknown, she had adopted a forlorn circus child, whose origin was as obscure as her own, and befriended it. Her maid was devoted to her, although, in a fit of temper, she had been known to strike her, and hurt her badly. Still, at other times her nature was so lovable that it was hard indeed for most people to resist her fascination. What she might have been with a different beginning, a different bringing-up, it is difficult to say. She was Cécile la Roche, with her pouting and her smiles, her tempers and her kisses, and would remain so to the end.

“Already!” said Randal, as they drove through the streets of Monaco.

Clatter up and down the hills, with the streets

growing dark, and the people standing at their doors to watch them drive past. Clatter up into Monte Carlo proper, below the orange-trees and mimosa, past the pretty villas, past the gardens, till they neared Cécile's house.

"*Enfin*, we are almost there," she said.

"I am sorry, mademoiselle."

"And I too, monsieur."

"Perhaps," she continued, "we shall drive again one day."

Randal flushed.

"I hope so, mademoiselle," he said.

They were at her gate. He sprang down and turned to help her. As he did so she half stumbled, and was thrown against him. He took her in his arms and lifted her down.

"Pardon!" she cried. "I thank you."

He stood silent, gazing down at her face. She lifted it towards him and held out her hand. A slight doubt crossed his mind.

"Are you really as young as you look?" he said.

She laughed. "What woman is? No, monsieur."

He was amused at her frankness, and laughed too.

"Forgive me; I should not have asked. *Au revoir*, mademoiselle."

"*Au revoir*."

He held the small gloved hand for a moment, and then got into the carriage again. He saw her as he drove off, walking up the tiny garden, and stopping to pull a rose and breathe its perfume.

He leant back and closed his eyes, trying to imagine her still beside him. The scent she used seemed to have scented him too, and he could not forget her so long as he smelt it and loved its perfume. At night he lay for some time striving to recall her face, her smiles, her gestures, and he smiled to himself, while she, dancing away at Nice, in a mask and domino, wondered what he was doing and thinking of, and questioned Dotty about him—much to that young gentleman's astonishment. The woman felt, and the man felt, without knowing why, that henceforth they would each have a place in the other's life. For good or evil, they had

met, had been meant to meet, and must remain friends. She was interested in him, and he was strongly attracted by her, and neither of them was likely to let anything come in the way of a whim, however weak, if they wished to gratify it. Randal was strong in his weakness, and, alas ! was ceasing to be ashamed of it.

## CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH MOST OF THE CHARACTERS TAKE  
LEAVE OF MONTE CARLO.

THERE are many of us who feel conscious of a dual existence—as if we were composed of two separate and distinct beings, having no connection with each other save that these two souls inhabit one body. They have different dreams, wishes, thoughts, and aspirations, different virtues and different crimes. Randal was conscious that his better nature and his lower were at war. And not only that, his very reason seemed to be fighting his inclination. For a time reason triumphed. He stayed at home with his young wife, and with the exaggeration a strong nature is often capable of, over-did it, and grew tired of staying in one room the whole day with an invalid who was too ill and unhappy to be a very bright companion.

In the evening he strolled down towards the Casino in no very pleasant frame of mind, and on the way there he became conscious of some voices he knew behind him.

There was no mistaking Graham's lisping voice and light laugh, but, strange to say, he seemed very much in earnest, and Randal caught himself listening for the answer with more interest than he would have cared to own.

"It is no use," Graham cried. "You know I love you. I have loved you for long, and you know that too. Is it altogether hopeless? Am I always to do your bidding and pretend I do not care when you smile at other people, drive back from Nice with other people, and care nothing for me?"

"*Mon ami*, you can go."

"I cannot go."

"You can cease to love."

"Impossible, too. You know, Cécile, I am yours, body and soul, for life. Bid me commit a crime, and——"

"Hush! Why should I want a crime

committed? Tell me of this Monsieur Morgan——”

“I will not talk of Morgan.”

“Then you can leave me. You bore me!”

“Cécile! Cécile!”

There was real agony in his voice. It rang into the night air so full of pain that Randal pitied him. Weak, even bad, he might be, but he was suffering, this young worldling, and Randal liked him better than he had ever done before.

Randal Morgan, the great politician, lingering in the Monte Carlo gardens to listen to the conversation of one of Society's favourites and a pretty woman, and listening with his brain on fire, and his heart beating so violently that he feared they might hear it.

“*Dis donc, mon ami,*” she exclaimed. “*Tu m'aimes* a little—not much. You think much, but I know better. When you are yourself, cool and careless, I like you very well; but when you are serious and grave you make me *triste*. Do you understand?”

“Only too well, Cécile.”



"*Allons*, let us be merry."

"I have no heart for it to-night."

"Then I will give you mine. Wait; not for ever. For to-night."

"Cécile, don't torture me."

Randal knew she was pouting, and clenched his teeth. They passed him, and as they did so he grew bold and touched her arm. She turned and looked into his eyes, but did not seem to know him, and passed on. He cursed his luck, and could not bear to follow them, but retraced his steps towards the hotel.

So Graham, with his fair face and lisping voice, loved her, and she let him tell her so; while he—— Well, while he was left far behind in the cold. Was he, after all? He was not so sure of that. She had wished to question Graham about him, had betrayed an interest in him. Would it last? Did she really mean it? Or had she recognised him, and wished him to hear their conversation? Impossible to say. Only Randal felt he should like to see her again—must make an effort to see her again. What did it matter in Monte Carlo? His wife was ill, and

he had nothing better to do. Why not go and call at the Villa the very next afternoon? At least she would amuse him, and he had come away in search of rest and amusement, and meant to get both. Friendship with La Roche was a little beneath him in his position, but the wish to see her was stronger than his dignity—stronger than all the reasoning in the world. Would she smile or pout, laugh or be grave? What would she talk of, do, or wear? He must go—no doubt of it—just this once, and let her see he was worth knowing; had a little more in him than men such as Graham and Dotty, whose nonsense she must have tired of long ago.

But in the morning his wife was better, and he felt a little ashamed. She was so glad to have him near her, so sweet, and so beautiful. Every tender feeling he had surrounded the thought of her with came over him then. She was so good, so much better than he was, so far above him. Even as he thought of this, and was strolling down the Condamine in the afternoon, he met the Italian driving in from Nice,

and with the Italian came the remembrance of another face and a mouth that pouted, and he hesitated no more.

"Where are you going?" he called out.

"To call on La Roche."

"May I come too?"

"*Mais, oui, monsieur?* With great pleasure."

The carriage stopped, and Randal took his place.

"This is unexpected and charming," the Italian said.

"I am so glad I met you."

"She is very amusing, is she not—La Roche?"

"She interests me as being so unlike my own countrywomen."

"Oh, indeed! The interest is mutual."

Randal glanced hastily at his new friend, but found he was staring out to sea, his face as white and cold as usual, his eyes with no light in them, his expression impossible to read.

"You are a great duellist, monsieur?" said Randal.

"I have never failed to kill my man."

The Italian smiled still at the horizon, and his companion felt a little disgusted at his cool, indifferent tone.

"After all," he thought, "these foreigners are very queer; but the women—well, the women are different."

Mademoiselle la Roche was in, and would see them. The Italian flung himself into a chair near the window, and lit a cigarette.

"Will mademoiselle allow that?" inquired Randal, astonished.

"Oh, yes; and take one herself, too. Pray sit down. She will probably keep us waiting exactly fifteen minutes."

He took out his watch, and laid it down on a little table at his elbow.

"Now we can talk," he said.

Randal drew a seat near, and began to wish he had come alone, quite forgetting that he had almost settled not to come at all. The Italian talked flippantly, carelessly, and Randal listened.

Presently a light step was heard in the hall, and La Roche opened the door.

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"*Bonjour*, gentlemen. How are you?"

More than ever like a child, her dress was simple and white, a blue ribbon was tied round her head and fastened in a bow above her fringe. Some large pearls encircling her throat were her only ornament.

The Italian rose and bent low over her hand. Randal held it for a moment in his, and searched her face curiously with his keen eyes to try and discover if she were pleased at his visit. It would have taken a man less infatuated than Randal to read her childish face. The Italian may have known, but if he did he showed nothing.

"Please sit down again, Monsieur Morgan, and please smoke. Louis, what are those cigarettes?"

"The same as I always smoke. Would you like one?"

"No, not now. Well, monsieur" (to Randal), "what have you been doing since I last saw you?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? How *triste*! Are you coming to the dinner to-night?"

"What dinner, mademoiselle?"

"Dotty went round to your hotel to ask you just now. Did you not see him?"

"No, we must just have missed each other. Tell me about it."

"We dine at the Paris. The usual party, including the Signor here. *Nest ce pas, Louis?*"

"*Mais, oui*, I go with much pleasure."

"Pleasure! Do *you* take pleasure in anything?"

"Yes, mademoiselle, in you. You are an interesting study."

"*Tiens!* you think so? I do not."

She glanced timidly at Randal from time to time. Sometimes the Italian caught her doing so, and at such times she blushed. Randal never missed a glance, nor did he fail to return them with interest.

"Ah!" thought the Italian, "*mes enfans, mes chers enfans*, what are you about? I pity Madame, the wife, who is ill at the hotel.

M. the politician is well amused without her. *Helas !* that is the world, and the world is a very pleasant place, *après tout*."

"So," the Italian said, "you go to this ball?"

"The *bal costumé*? *Si*. I shall wear a dress like Cléopâtre. It will amuse me. But I want a dagger to push into my girdle. Do either of you gentlemen know where I can buy one?"

Randal had a tiny dagger, which had belonged to Maggie's father, and which she had given him some months ago. But he hesitated about lending it, as he knew Maggie valued it highly, it having been taken from some Indian prince in the Mutiny.

"You can surely buy one in Nice," the Italian answered. "I, alas! cannot oblige you. Perhaps monsieur is more fortunate?"

Monsieur was. He drew out the tiny, much-ornamented weapon, and held it towards her.

"Please allow me to lend you this. I have always carried it for some time. I value it very

much, so you will not mind my asking for it back when you have finished with it."

"*Mais, non.* You are very *gentil*, monsieur. Oh! I am pleased."

She played with it as if she loved to feel its blade, and the Italian, watching her, relaxed into a smile.

"You look like a man who is going to fight a duel," he said.

"Well, you ought to know what they look like," she retorted, angry and indignant.

Randal laughed, the Italian laughed, and stroked his hair carefully with his long, white hand.

Soon after he took his leave, and Randal followed his example. As he shook hands with La Roche, he found her large eyes raised entreatingly to his.

"Shall you come to the dinner?" she asked. He looked at her, drew a long breath, and said, "Yes," and so they parted.

The dinner was a repetition of the first they had had together, only La Roche seemed a little more silent, and Randal more talkative. Graham



was out of sorts, and watched Randal. The Italian, less bored than usual, watched Mademoiselle, Dotty and Lord Chester laughed and joked as before, and Franklin again conversed with the Jew.

In the midst of dinner Randal's valet brought him a letter. It enclosed a telegram from England, to tell him his friend, with whom he had been brought up and educated, was dying. He rose, and bade Dotty a hurried "Good-bye."

"It is bad news from England," he said. "I may have to return."

As he spoke, his eyes met Cécile's, and he saw hers were full of tears. Any little vexation was enough to make her cry, but he did not know this, and was astonished and flattered.

"Good-bye, mademoiselle," he said, and held her hand a minute longer than was needful, while she stared into his face with her great eyes, and her lips trembled.

"*Addio*," said the Italian, and he shook hands with the rest, and bowed himself out of the room.

He hurried through the quiet streets, and up to his wife's room, where she sat at the window in her white *peignoir*, with her beautiful face sad and tired.

Randal was reluctant to leave, but his wife, who was really much better, and hated the place, promised to follow in a week's time, if he would return. Of course he should have stayed longer, for the good of his throat, but Margaret had grown to be careless over Randal's health.

She had become suspicious, and in spite of being weak, and unfit to leave her room, she saw him off at the station herself, and returned alone to the hotel.

She had suffered much in her proud, reserved way at his evident neglect and carelessness about her health. She noticed many little things, mere nothings in themselves, but which put together were evidence that he was doing something which she had never heard of, meeting someone of whom he never spoke.

She wandered about Monaco when she was better, and took some pleasant drives to the

places near, but all the time the poor girl thought how she had dreamed of visiting each place with her husband, and how interesting Randal would have been and how amusing a companion. She so little believed in the weaker part of her husband's nature that she was certain it would be all right when once they were home, and yet she grieved over the pleasure lost at Monte Carlo. It might all have been so different.

Randal wrote every day. He was in great distress about his friend. Then the news came of his death, and Margaret settled to return.

She met Reginald Graham the last day of her stay, and he asked her if she would care to see the gaming-rooms at night.

"It is a sight quite worth seeing, Mrs. Morgan. Will you dine with me, and let me take you there as your husband is away?"

Margaret was loth to accept, but Graham offered to invite a newly-married couple whom they both knew, and she ended by consenting to go.

She enjoyed the dinner, but her horror of the close air, the ghastly earnestness of the gamblers, and the crowd of gaily-dressed women who haunted the rooms spoiled her pleasure.

Graham had smiled at a young fellow she knew was a friend of her husband's, and who was talking to a woman dressed in a wonderful silk dress, with pearls round her throat, and a large diamond crescent at her breast. Her face was pretty, but she seemed feverishly miserable, and talked fast and foolishly till she suddenly saw Margaret watching her, and pulled Dotty's coat sleeve.

*"Dis donc. Who is that? The lady in black with the white face."*

"Oh—ah, Mrs. Morgan."

"That!"

Margaret turned whiter under the fire of the evil eyes, which seemed to long to kill her as they looked. The girl grew frightened, and whispered to the lady with her that one of the women stared so queerly. Whereat her friend laughed, and said it was very likely, as Margaret was so pretty.

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But the young wife did not heed the compliment. She was wretched till they got out of the place, for the cruel eyes seemed to follow her everywhere.

The next day she started for Paris, and in due time reached London.

Randal had gone through so much in the short time since the Monte Carlo days that Margaret found him his old, grave, reliant self. He was very much distressed about his friend's death, and very glad to have her back again; in every way he seemed the old Randal, and she smiled and was happy once more. There is always a calm, a sort of holding of the breath on the part of nature, before a storm, and Margaret lived happily in that moment without looking forward to evil before it came.

They were much invited out, as the season was soon to begin, and she was delighted to find Randal as much a favourite and as capable of doing good work as before his illness. His friends rallied round him, and the papers praised his last speech more highly than they had done before.

One warm day, at the beginning of May, she was sitting in her boudoir, when Graham was announced. He drew a chair near to hers, and talked of Randal's cleverness and Randal's success, while she poured out tea for him, and smiled as she listened.

"I suppose he is very busy now, Mrs. Morgan?"

"Very; he always is."

"I called at the club, and couldn't find him. Dotty is in town again, and I want Randal to dine and come to a theatre with us if he will."

Margaret smiled. "I am sure he will be very glad to do so if he has a night to spare. I expect him home every moment, if you will wait and see him."

"Thank you, I should like to do so. You know Dotty is going to be married, I suppose."

"Really, how strange it seems. I never met Mr. Leighton, but I have heard him so much talked of."

"Well, it is true. Poor Dotty, we are going

to have a few dinners *en garçon* together first. I think he's doing it to save himself from the dogs."

"Oh! is she rich?"

"Very."

Margaret as usual felt bored with her companion, but strove to find subjects of conversation likely to interest him till Randal entered.

He looked tired, and a little cross. As he came towards her his face lit up, and he gave a hand to Graham, and placed one arm round his wife.

"I shall have double work to do, Maggie," he said. "Lee is dead."

"Randal! How shocking! When did he die?"

"Last night. It's in the papers. By-the-bye, Reggie, is this true about Dotty?"

"Yes; isn't it a joke?"

"Who's the girl?"

"Oh, a nobody, but rich."

"Randal, Mr. Graham wants you to dine with him some night soon."

"I'm very sorry, old fellow," said Randal,

"but I cannot manage it. I have to be in the House every night, you know."

"Can't you come on Wednesday?"

"I'm afraid not," answered Randal, who did not want to go.

Margaret went to the window, leaving the two men alone near the little tea-table.

"La Roche is over here," said Graham, in a half-whisper.

Randal started, passed his hand across his brow in a perplexed manner, and then slowly turned and stared at Graham.

"What has that to do with me?" he asked.

"Nothing, of course, but you knew her, didn't you? They say she's followed Dotty from Monte Carlo."

"Nonsense!"

"That's what I say. She never cared for him. Well, will you dine?"

"No," said Randal, speaking with an evident effort. "No, I am sorry, but I cannot."

"Randal," said Margaret, "I must go and dress, if Mr. Graham will excuse me. We are



engaged to go to the Stanleys' to-night, you know."

"Oh, yes, yes! Graham, come down and have a smoke. I have a quarter of an hour to spare, if you can stay."

Once alone in the cosy smoking-room, Graham began again.

"Funny little woman, La Roche," he said, in a muffled voice, for he had a large cigar between his lips.

"What the devil has that to do with me? You are always ramming the woman down my throat."

Graham stared, much astonished, but Randal turning crimson, he smiled.

"Nothing, as I said before. Only she sent you this letter." And he drew from his pocket a small pink missive. Randal was more angry than he cared to show.

"She is a little fool," he said, and he slowly lit a match, and set fire to the letter without reading it.

"She will kill me if I tell her how you treated it," Graham remarked.

"Why?"

"She has a beastly temper: is a perfect little fiend when roused."

"Then don't rouse her."

Graham knocked off his cigar ash into a handy tray, and then continued as if nothing had been said on the subject before.

"Could you dine, by the way, on Wednesday?"

Randal laughed nervously.

"Wednesday; let me see — Wednesday. Well, perhaps I could. Where do you dine?"

"At the Berkeley, 7.30. Dotty, Franklin, Moses, and Chester."

"Is that all?"

Graham moved his eyes in a shifty manner from his boots to the door and back again.

"Unless I ask someone else in the meantime, yes."

They were both silent; then the visitor rose to go.

"I mustn't keep a busy man like yourself waiting any longer. Ta-ta, Randal; don't forget to come."

"If I am very busy——"

"Oh, but you won't be; it's nearly a week till then. Good-bye."

Margaret noticed that Randal was feverish, nervously irritable the rest of the evening. She fancied he was over-tired, and blamed herself for not making him stay at home and rest.

He went away to the House after dinner, and she waited up for his return with a troubled, anxious face, and an undefined dread at her heart. He answered her roughly, and bade her go to bed when he did come in; and then he drew her to him and kissed her so passionately that she grew frightened, and insisted that he was ill.

The next day was just the same. He was restless, ill - at - ease, did not know his own mind for two minutes together, and bullied the servants, while he grumbled at his wife. This state of things lasted nearly a week. When Wednesday evening came she was surprised to find him dining out, but forbore to inquire what had made him change his mind. He returned more excitable, more furious and vexed with

everything than before. He seemed afraid to meet her eye, and shrank from a *tête-à-tête* with her. He forgot to see that his letters were posted, and grew careless over his work.

In the middle of the second week she woke one day to find him still sleeping beside her, and looking so worn and worried that she could feel nothing but pity, and forgave him his late harshness on the spot. She dressed softly, and then could not resist returning and laying her cheek on the pillow beside his.

Something made the tears spring to her eyes; she moved a little nearer and kissed his curly hair.

He moved, half-woke, and flinging out his arms, found her, and held her close.

"*C'est toi*," he murmured, "you know I love you. However cold I may seem the truth remains. Oh, I am so tired of it all."

"Randal, dear," said the girl, "what is the matter?"

He started up, threw her from him, and called out:

"What! Is it *you*? I thought——"

And then they looked at each other, and the girl grew as white as the gown she wore. She moved first, and turned her back to him to go on with her dressing. Randal attempted no explanation : he seemed dazed ; and when they met at breakfast they conversed as usual. Only the girl's face was so drawn, and white, and stern, that no casual observer could have done anything else but pity her, and the man seemed to have shrunk into something mean and poor beside her dignified pride and reserve.

She went about the house like a ghost of her former self in the days that followed, and seemed as if she could never rouse herself from some horrible dream. Once or twice, at some social gathering, she heard her husband spoken of as having failed to do something expected of him, and she smiled as if she pitied the people who had faith in him. She was proud and cold to Randal, and his home became unbearable to him, for the sight of her white face made him feel afraid.

He was blind to the beauty of her graceful, thin figure, her dignity, her classical features

and refinement. Her good breeding seemed a reproach to him; her pride put him in the wrong.

And yet all the time she watched him with a breaking heart, and longed for him to throw himself upon her mercy, and ask her to forgive.

She met young Graham at an evening party once, and astonished him by asking abruptly, "Who was the woman that Dotty knew at Monte Carlo?"

"What woman, Mrs. Morgan?"

"I mean the one my husband knew, too. What was her name?"

Graham flushed. "There were three——"

"There was only one, Mr. Graham. You know whom I mean."

"No, indeed I don't; ask Dotty," and Graham pulled his friend near to him, and shifted the responsibility on to his shoulders.

"Really," said Dotty, very much flurried, "there was a famous actress there, and, let me see, a girl who once sold oranges in a circus; what was her name?"

Margaret's lips curled.

"That is what I asked you, Mr. Leighton."

"The actress was called Mdlle. de B—— something, and then there was Madame Dolfus."

"Tell me the name of the third."

"The girl who had been in a circus?"

"Yes."

"I really forget."

"I don't think I ever saw her; was she pretty?"

"La Roche! Oh! I don't know."

"Thank you. I should advise you to speak the truth another time, Mr. Leighton."

Dotty flushed, stammered, and finally left her to curse his friend for getting him into such a mess.

Poor Margaret was so young to have nothing to look forward to, so gentle to be wounded so early, and to be dragged down by her husband's misdeeds. She tried to believe that she had no love left for him, while she knew that she had; she tried to believe that she was as cold and indifferent as she looked, and knew she was not. She tried to think she had no husband, since he had proved himself unworthy, and

prayed for him all the more passionately each night.

It seemed such a short time since Randal had so depended on her judgment, so guarded her from all that might trouble her innocent happiness. And now the girl fancied herself growing hard, as she prayed to God to let her die and end her misery, in spite of her nineteen summers and the husband she still loved.



## CHAPTER IV.

## LA ROCHE IN LONDON.

SHE was seated in front of her looking-glass, and smiled at her reflection. It certainly was pretty, and babyish, and fair. She stopped all preparations suddenly, and put her small firm chin down on the pink palms of her plump hands. The maid drew back a moment and busied herself with putting some things away at the other end of the room. La Roche stared gravely at the face in the glass, and muttered to herself in a low voice, in French :

“ *Eh bien*, will he come or will he not come ? And I ? Why do I want him ? Not because I love. I cannot love. To please my vanity ? Yes, and why not ? People do much worse things than this with much less reason every day. He is so strong and stern ; what a triumph

to make him gentle! Poor you" (to the reflection), "you have been sadly neglected all your life: the child of a dishonoured mother. *Mon Dieu!* what misery you were born to. Why should you not have some happiness; if even it is needful to steal it from this proud English wife? Poof, I am foolish to sit here and think."

She moved impatiently, and pulled a small dagger from one of the dressing-table drawers. She stared at it for a few seconds, and then laid her warm red lips against the cold blade. The maid was furtively watching her, but showed no surprise. A clock struck; La Roche started. "Seven already! *Mon Dieu*, I shall be late! Come, Marie, quick, finish dressing me! Some powder and my pearls! Who sent those flowers? Monsieur Graham? All the better, I will wear them. Now my cloak. Is my hair all right? My fan, my gloves. Oh, send off that letter. Is the child asleep? I must go and kiss her. Oh! Marie, do I look nice to-night?"

"Mademoiselle is always beautiful."

La Roche laughed. "I look wicked, naughty, don't I Marie?"

"A little—perhaps."

The girl laughed again and ran into the next room, where the child, rescued in the old circus days from crime and misery, lay sleeping in its little bed. La Roche laid her soft cheek against its face, and it woke.

"*Ma tante, ma tante,*" and it flung its soft little arms round her neck, "how beautiful you look."

"*Tu trouves, mon ange?*"

"But yes. *Bonsoir, ma tante.*"

"Good-night, *chérie.* Sleep well."

Graham was below with his single brougham, he helped her in, and took his seat beside her.

"Well, *mon ami,*" she said, "did you give my letter asking him to dine?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He burnt it."

"*C'est vrai?*"

"I am sorry to say it is true."

"Thank you, *mon ami*, I do not mind. Well, as to this dinner, will Dotty be there?"

"Yes, and the rest."

"La, la; la, la. How grave you look."

"It is nothing."

"How ugly your London is," she said, glancing out of the window. "Why do you not live in Paris? Beautiful Paris."

"I often go over there."

"Is my dress nice, Reggie?"

"Charming."

"But you are *triste*. You sigh."

"Never mind, we are there. This dinner is given to please you and not to please me. So you must supply the gaiety."

"*Tiens!* I am ready. *Allons.*"

Randal merely bowed when she entered the room; he was vexed at himself for having come. She in her turn was furious that he had burnt her letter, and they both by common consent avoided meeting each other's eyes. She began teasing Dotty at once about his marriage, and asking a number of questions which

that young gentleman did not seem inclined to answer.

"Really your gardenias smell too strongly," he said, at length.

"Do they? I like it; they remind me of the south."

"It's nearly as bad as the orange blossoms in your garden at Monte Carlo."

"Orange blossoms! Did I not tell you, gentlemen, his mind runs on marriage. When shall you marry, Dotty?"

"Never."

"Oh! oh! Does the lady agree to that?"

"Hush!" said Franklin. "Of course he will marry. Dotty, my dear fellow, don't be foolish."

"I always was and am."

"Then turn over a new leaf; it's high time you did."

"Well, don't you sermonise. Moses won't feel comfortable if you do. I mightn't borrow any more money if I did as you wish."

"No, but you might pay me," suggested the Jew, at which they all laughed.

Randal caught himself furtively watching La Roche in spite of himself. He loved to hear her broken-English again; the scent of her flowers reached him where he sat; the very rustle of her silk dress as she moved seemed to take him back to Monte Carlo once more and to hold him captive again.

The conversation was just the same—just as foolish, as reckless, only La Roche seemed changed, a little less at her ease, a little vexed at something.

Later on Dotty offered her a cigarette. She had a shrewd suspicion that Randal would dislike to see her smoke, and did so accordingly.

“Your cigars are cork-tipped, Mr. Morgan; I like them best. Will you give me one?” she said.

He bit his thick lips and handed her his case.

She raised her eyebrows, and read the inscription on the outside.

“From Maggie to Randal on his birthday, 1890.”

Her face turned very white. She took a

cigarette, and handed the case back again. The sight of the cigarette between her small red lips sent Randal frantic. He had old-fashioned ideas on such subjects, and could not bear to see a woman smoke, especially a woman he in any way admired.

"Was that cigarette case from his wife?" La Roche whispered to Graham.

"Yes, evidently."

"I hate her! I hate her!"

"Cécile!"

"It is true; I could kill her."

"Why?"

"Because I am jealous."

"You are mad."

"Yes, I am mad when I am jealous. Now, gentlemen, let us go to the theatre."

"So soon," cried Dotty.

"Yes, so soon."

Randal hardly knew how he sat through the play. It was no use disguising the fact that this childish face bewitched him. As they came out of the theatre together, she lifted her face to his.

"You burnt my letter. Why?" she whispered.

"I do not know."

"Will you come and see me?"

"If I may."

"Perhaps you do not like me?"

"I like you far too well: you know that."

Her eyes glistened as if with triumph, and she turned her head away.

"How could I know?" she said.

"You must have guessed it."

"When shall you come?"

"To-morrow—the next day—always!"

She looked up at him, and he looked down at her, and so they went out of the theatre together.

\* \* \* \*

The greater the man, the greater the fall. What does it matter when some obscure wretch, who has been born in the midst of crime, brought up in the midst of crime, fed on crime, worked at crime, and taken his pleasure amid crime: what does it matter, we say, when such a man follows in the footsteps of his ancestors and falls?



But the higher the idol is placed, the further it is from the ground, and the more noise it makes as it is shattered to pieces. There is one thing the world often forgets, that the more the idol climbs, the more he is tempted, for every great position has its appertaining temptations, like so many demons laying in wait for the victim.

A man, too, may be great in one thing, and all the weaker in another, because of his strength in the first. Randal's gigantic will came to his aid when he meant to sin just as it helped him to do good, because Randal's good was all for himself, because it furthered his own ends, and seated him upon the pedestal. Had he done good for the sake of doing right, for the sake of aiding his country, he might never have fallen. But Randal worked for Randal's glory, and sinned for Randal's pleasure. His one weakness was terrible in its strength, and the woman who had found it out, laid it bare, and triumphed, knew this well enough. She might have tired of her prize long ago but for the fact that Randal's better nature fought his weaker; Randal's pride

rallied him, called to him to fulfil his political duties, while his vanity, his love, as he chose to call it, pulled him the other way. Love! Such a man as Randal Morgan can never feel love. He may respect what he lacks himself, even slightly reverence what is above him, but love, in the highest form of the word, he must ever remain incapable of.

And the woman, what of her? Her vanity was, perhaps, equal to his will, and her vanity was a tyrant. "*Je le veux parceque je le veux*," she would say, and love in her language meant love for herself and nothing for the man. He fed her vanity, amused her, piqued her, sometimes even angered her. For all along her jealousy of the young wife was terrible; it haunted her by day and by night. Her vanity refused to share a man. He must be hers alone or not hers at all. And so every backward glancée, every impulse towards a return to duty, she fought, because she believed it was due to the wife's influence, and, therefore, must be overcome. She knew she could never rise to Randal's better nature, so she dragged him down

to her own level. She was capricious, difficult to manage, had a hundred different moods, tears one day, laughter the next, and each one was a new link in the chain which bound him to her. Every noble thought, every noble idea, she breathed on and soiled, lest the wife should have originated it. She could never forgive the wife for being pure and good, clever and beautiful. She would have understood *this*, appreciated *that*, so this and that must be proved worthless, torn to pieces, and fall a prey to her jealous rage. Randal grew to dread her violent temper, and to see her intolerable vanity, and yet he remained a slave to the baby face, the coaxing voice, and the childish fascination which he had liked the first day he saw her. Everything in him that had no part with herself she defiled and spoilt, and Randal knew it. He knew more than this: he knew in a short time he would be morally ruined, that his wife was wretched, that his party expected great things of him which would never be fulfilled, and yet he willingly gave up all. There were times when he grew ashamed, and at such times they

would quarrel, and on one occasion she had lifted a knife from the table and vowed to kill them both if he thwarted her. Randal had laughed, while he knew she meant it, yet the reconciliation which followed only bound him closer to her. The very fact that he fought occasionally to be free showed her his strength anew, and made him better worth the keeping.

Sometimes it seemed as if he might have escaped her altogether. How often this occurred she never knew.

It was when, stealing home at night, after a day spent in her company, he opened the door of Margaret's room, to see her lying asleep, as the angels might, her young face troubled and white, her mouth drooping at the corners, and her arms folded, as if she were dead, across her breast.

He knew as he looked that the form he gazed at was pure and good. That it held a soul so far above his own that he had no right to have even owned its earthly resting-place. He knew that she grew all the nearer to God in her patience and suffering, as he grew far from Him,

and at such times he would enter and kneel by the bedside, and with all the strength of his guilty soul would weep and pray. She never woke, and as noiselessly he would turn and steal out again, to fight the old battle with the Devil in the morning, and, as of old, to fall.

One day, as he was walking home, Randal almost ran into Reggie Graham. The latter stopped, and offered to walk a little way with him. Graham spoke of Dotty's engagement, and said he thought it doubtful that anything would come of it, although Franklin wished it very much, as it might make Dotty settle down and lead a quieter life. From one thing to another, he came to La Roche. He praised her beauty, her dress, her charm, and then went on to deplore her temper.

"I warn you, Morgan," he said, "you had better not give her occasion to be jealous."

"Nonsense," said Randal. "What do you mean?"

"Did you never hear the old circus story of her and her rival?"

"No."

"They say she hated the girl for gaining more applause than she had done, and one day, as she rode into the ring, they had some words about something. La Roche raised her whip and struck the girl across the face, laying the bone bare. I believe this is quite true. She is like a mad woman at times."

Randal was angry and indignant. "I don't believe it," he said. "Why, my dear Graham, perhaps you are jealous yourself."

"You are scarcely fair, Morgan. Please remember I introduced you; did even more than that, gave a dinner here in London to——"

"Hush, that will do. I beg your pardon. Only I had an idea that you had once cared for her yourself."

"Yes, but happily for me she would have none of me."

"How, happily?"

"Because, otherwise, Morgan, she might have ruined me as she seems to be ruining you."

"Graham!"

"Well, good-bye. I expect you are vexed with me now. Never mind, I have warned you. After all, I imagine you would care if she threw vitriol in Mrs. Morgan's face ; and these foreigners are given to that, they say."

"You are mad."

"Perhaps I am, but if so many people share an opinion, we don't call them mad. Write and ask the Italian what he knows of her."

"I should have said the Signor was a polished liar, my dear Graham."

"So he is, but he won't lie about La Roche. He knows better. Well, I'm off. Good-bye."

Randal was more angry than he would have cared to own. Of course, Graham was jealous ; but, at any rate, he had no right to talk in that way to him. Graham seemed to class him, Randal Morgan, as one of his own set, worthless, empty-headed, and bad. He had no reason for believing him so. Randal's vanity was deeply wounded ; Graham had attempted to patronise *him*, the great politician, the man of the world.

Even a puppy can bite, and Graham had bitten hard.

Meanwhile Margaret was seated in her drawing-room, and before her was the politician, whom, months ago, she had received at her own dinner-table as a friend of Randal's. He was very grave, very sorry, and a little pompous. He was sorry to say he was much disappointed, the country was disappointed in her husband. They had believed in him, counted on him, and found they had done wrong. He was not satisfactory, not in the least what they had hoped; he had not fulfilled their high expectations.

Margaret said nothing, but her eyes filled with tears.

"I believe, dear Mrs. Morgan," the great man continued, "that you have much influence with your husband. May I ask you to use that influence on our behalf?"

"I am afraid——"

"Oh, please don't refuse! I cannot tell you how sorry we all are to see a young man like your husband placing himself in such



a false position, shirking work, and in every way behaving in a manner unworthy of him."

"Why do you not speak to Randal himself?"

"I have already done so, Mrs. Morgan."

The politician was great on the subject of human suffering in the abstract, but he was blind to the reality in front of him. The tall, graceful girl sat upright in her chair; her eyes strained with weeping; her lips parted as if with pain. If ever a look said, "Spare me," she said it then, but he was either careless of her, or blind.

"It is deplorable," he continued; "we want him to speak to-morrow night. The Bill will have a hard fight as it is. Morgan knows more about this special subject than perhaps any man living. He has refused to speak."

"Impossible!" The girl rose and faced him. "Oh, indeed, you cannot mean it!"

"I state a fact, Mrs. Morgan. Ah, here is Lawson; he will tell you the same thing."

"How do you do?" said the wife.

"I am quite well, thank you. How tired you look, Mrs. Morgan."

"Yes, I am very tired."

Mr. Lawson, M.P., was kind-hearted and not blind; he was sorry for the girl, and wished he had not come.

"I was just telling Mrs. Morgan about her husband," the great man said.

"We wanted to beg you to appeal to him," the other continued. "I hope you will forgive us for worrying you about it."

"You say my husband has refused?"

"Here is his letter."

Margaret took it, and glanced down the page.

"Oh, how unlike Randal!" she exclaimed.

"Well, so I said," Mr. Lawson answered. "I am most grieved about the whole thing."

The great man turned and stared at him.

"You had better show her the paper," he said, with a wave of his hand, as if feelings of any kind excepting disgust were out of the question.

"What paper?" asked the girl.

"Oh, no! There is no need for that."

"Please, Mr. Lawson, let me see it too."

It was an attack on her husband, well-deserved, but violent and exaggerated.

Margaret grew very white.

"Please leave this with me to show to my husband. And now, I am far from well, may I ask you to excuse me?"

"I am so very sorry to have troubled you," Mr. Lawson said.

"Pray," the great man cried, "tell your husband that *I* am deeply grieved," and so they bowed themselves out of the room.

It was long since Randal had had any talk with his wife. He found her laid in one of the chairs in the smoking-room when he returned home.

"Randal," she said, "I have something to say to you."

He compressed his thick lips, and stood ready near the writing-table

"I am going to read you this article first."

"Well, go on."

She began, but had counted too much on her

strength. At the most bitter abuse, her voice gave, and she broke down. Her beautiful head went down on her hands, and she sobbed aloud.

Randal was not unmoved. It was so long since she had troubled to speak to him, so long since he had had any chance to feel how sweet and how good she was. As long as she remained the statue, and was proud and cold, he could harden his heart, and go his way, but now she was so very womanly, so sweet, and so beautiful.

His voice was husky when he spoke at length.

"Maggie," he said, "don't cry, don't cry."

"How can I help it, Randal? Oh, my husband, if you knew with what shame I read this, and feel it is true. If you can neglect me, can you also neglect your own good, your own position and work, your country? Oh, Randal, will nothing give you back to that—is it all hopeless?"

"Child, you don't know what you are saying."

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Again he was not unmoved ; his heavy hand, resting on the writing-table, shook. The fact that she would plead for him against himself, rather than plead for herself, touched him.

"I do know, only too well, what I am saying. The great politician was here to-day——"

"Ah !"

"And Mr. Lawson. They both told me how low you had fallen in their esteem, and not only in their eyes, but in the eyes of all your party."

"What do they expect me to do?"

"Much that you have left undone, Randal. Oh, you *know* you have neglected much, been careless over much, and disappointed them."

"They have no right to come and bother you."

She raised her delicate face, with the patient look he dreaded to see, and stared at him.

"How you have changed !" she said. "Once you used to be proud that nothing political was

beyond my understanding, that I was connected, associated with your work, even in the minds of those men, and now——”

“Well, well, Maggie. You make too much fuss about it.”

“Do you think so, Randal? I think this means the ruin of your whole career.”

“Well, what if it is?”

“Do you mean you have ceased to care?”

“I don’t know that. Really, Maggie, you ask absurd questions.”

“There are others I might ask, Randal, which you would care less to hear. You are growing cowardly. Why can you not face things? You are ruined politically and socially, and you pretend you do not mind. Is it nothing to you that your party *pity* you, and laugh behind your back? That men such as Dotty and Graham whisper about you and sneer; that your wife blushes for you, and carries such pain in her heart that—Oh! Randal, it is breaking!”

“Maggie!” He strode forward, but she waved him back.

"Let me cry a little. Leave me alone. I have never spoken before, but I must now. If my speaking can save you from yourself, I am repaid for all I have borne. Oh, my husband, see, I kneel to you, not for myself, for I know you ceased to care for me long ago, but for your country's sake, for your own sake, for—for your child's sake."

"Maggie!" He flung his arms round her, and strove to see her face. Her head was bent, and her tears fell fast.

"Maggie! Is it true? Oh, my dear, why did you never tell me before? I will do as you wish. You are an angel to speak to me at all. See, dear, I am sorry; I ask your pardon. I will write to Lawson, and promise to speak to-morrow. Maggie, my wife, look up. Smile at me. Say you forgive me, and let us be happy again."

Happy! Only Randal could have said that. She rose and staggered to the chair again.

"I forgive you," she said, as if she were very weary. He knelt down close to the chair, kissed

her hands, and murmured a hundred tender names as he did so.

How little he understood her. Did he really believe that one word could wipe out all the miserable past—one word make up for all her suffering?

He would go at once; he had an appointment in half an hour, but he could write to Lawson. He would speak to please her. Would she be pleased? Would she really be glad if he did so?

“Yes, oh, yes!”

He must leave her then. But he would write, and she would go and rest and take care of herself, and then when she read his speech in the papers two days later, be proud of her husband again.

“Yes, oh, yes!”

Would she kiss him? It was so long——

She lifted her delicate white face, and he kissed her lips.

But she sank back shuddering afterwards, and did not look round as he left the room.

Randal was always Randal. Why had she



expected more of him? and yet she had expected it. If this little child were born she did not want it to feel ashamed of its father, and yet— Oh, good, merciful God! could she ever again be proud of him?

No other man but Randal could have gone straight from his wife to La Roche. But he did so as a matter of course, and finding her out, sat down, wrote his letter, and told Marie to take it to Lawson's house.

On the stairs the maid met her mistress (La Roche had persuaded Randal not to go to the House the next day because it was her birthday). She took the letter from the maid's hand and broke the seal. She smiled as she read, but her smile disfigured her childish face, and was not pleasant to see.

"Ah! *ma chère madame*, it is you I have to thank for this," she thought. Aloud, she told her maid to go for a walk and leave her the letter.

Randal lay asleep on the couch in her sitting-room; she smiled again as she stood looking down at him. Then she carried the

letter into the room beyond and burnt it there.

Still Randal slept. She came in to watch him once or twice, and went back again. It was late when he woke. As he did so he recurred to his old habit of talking in his sleep, and breathed his wife's name.

"Maggie," said La Roche. "And who is Maggie?"

He sat up and stared at her.

"Who is Maggie, I say? *Dis!*"

"What does it matter?"

"It does matter, *mon ami*. You spoke the name just now, and I am jealous."

"Curse it, I am always talking in my sleep."

"Yes, *mon ami*, you are. It is a foolish habit. Now, once again, who is Maggie?"

"I forgot to say, Cécile, I cannot be with you to-morrow night."

"*Pardon*, you can."

"No, dear, it is impossible; I have to be in the House. I wrote to Lawson just now promising to speak on the S—— Bill. He will have got my letter by now."

"He will never get your letter."

"What do you mean?"

"I burnt it."

"Cécile!" Randal started to his feet and swore at her.

The woman rose, and then she began to speak as he had never heard her before; and Randal forgot himself and answered her. She went from violent abuse to tears, from tears to hysterics, and from hysterics to coaxing.

"It was her *fête* to-morrow. Her little *fête*. He pretended to love her, and he could leave her then. He could not be so cruel. It could not be his own idea. It was to please someone else. If he loved her he would stay," and so on.

They both said much that we need not chronicle; they both forgot themselves, and then Randal was weak, and forbore to blame her any more.

So much for good resolutions. So much for Randal's will where his pleasure interfered. He knew this one neglect of duty would be the last straw; he knew it meant ruin socially and politically, and he clung all the closer to the

woman who had dragged him down and was not ashamed of him. La Roche alone did not mind because his party was disappointed of him or thought less of him because he had neglected his duty. She was pleased, felt him all the more her own, and so much the less the wife's. He was hers at last, hers wholly, because henceforth he could scarcely dare to take his place again in the political world. If she had ruined him he was ruined with her, was at last a fit mate for the owner of the baby face and ungovernable temper.

So Randal had fallen indeed, how low few guessed, although they knew enough to make them despise him, and for the sake of a woman who was worthless, a woman who was cunning and vain, and who had never loved him, and never would. A woman whose smile was his Heaven, whose tears were his Hell. A woman who had indeed found his weak point, and fostered it until it grew, to the exclusion of all his better thoughts, his better feelings, and dragged him down to her own level.

And the victim of a man's evil passions and

a woman's vanity prayed for him in the home he had left desolate, as earnestly as if he had been the man who had first won her love in the early days of his fame, when Randal Morgan was said to be the coming man. Alas for prophecies! He never came.

## CHAPTER V.

MAGGIE! MAGGIE!

MARGARET had written to Mr. Lawson to say that Randal had promised her he would speak as they wished. The day following the one appointed for the reading of the Bill she heard he was waiting to see her in the drawing-room, and she begged that he would come up into her boudoir.

It was still very early, and she had not yet read the papers. Arthur Lawson was struck with the dainty little room, which he at once proceeded to admire, but he was also struck with the girl's face, which looked whiter than when he had last seen it, and more haggard.

"Well, she said at last, "have you come to tell me about the speech? I have just sent downstairs for the papers."

"You have not read them?"

"No. Why?"

"Your husband wasn't there, Mrs. Morgan."

"Not in the House at all?"

"No, I am sorry to say he was not."

He was not prepared to see her turn so white, or to see the piteous look of despair as she sank back upon the sofa, and covered her face with her hands.

"I am so sorry," he said. "I fear I told it roughly. Please forgive me, Mrs. Morgan."

"Yes, yes! Tell me——" she stopped, and then she added:

"Did he write to you the evening after I saw you, Mr. Lawson?"

"No! Oh, no!"

"How very strange. He has been away staying with Mr. Graham, for some dinner, I think it was, these last two days, so that I did not know."

"With Graham?"

"Yes."

"That young idiot who was kicked out of the Guards."

"Was he? I did not know."

"Well, I'm not quite sure. They say so. With Graham, are you sure?"

Margaret grew whiter still.

"Yes," she answered firmly; "Randal told me so."

"Ah, then, of course, I—after all, his not speaking is the chief thing. Our mutual friend who was here the other day is furious."

"Yes, I suppose he will be."

"Is this the end, Mrs. Morgan? What a pity it is! Can nothing be done? Do you mind my asking you (you are not obliged to answer, you know) what is the reason of this change in your husband?"

"He has grown careless."

"Careless! Randal! Not without a good reason."

"It is true, I assure you. He is tired of it all; has lost heart to go on. Oh! I cannot explain. Can't you see it is killing me?"

"I am sorry. I beg your pardon, I did not think. Please forgive me. I would not have started such a topic for the world if I had



guessed. Indeed, Mrs. Morgan, I am very, very sorry."

Margaret's face was hidden. She could not answer.

"Can I help you at all? May I do anything for you?"

"There is one thing I should be very grateful for."

"Tell me; I shall be proud to do it."

"It is to find out where Mr. Graham is, and ask him to come and see me. I believe he could help me a little."

"I will certainly do so. I know where he used to live, and can inquire if he is still there. Please take my deepest commiseration in your trouble, Mrs. Morgan. And now I must really go."

Margaret lifted her troubled face, with the tears still on her long lashes, and gave him her hand.

"Thank you," she said, with lips that trembled. "You have been very kind."

And when he had gone she sank back on the couch, feeling as if, indeed, everything was hopeless now. One idea which had possessed

her for some time would return again and again, as often as she put it from her. She thought, "I cannot reason well; I am too ill, and feel too worn out," but each time she reverted to it anew, thought it over again and again, and knew in the end she should adopt it. She had no friend to advise her, no one who knew the world to show her how useless it was. And Randal did not return.

Meanwhile Graham arrived, and was shown up to the boudoir. He could not conceal his dismay at the girl's sad face. Arthur Lawson had been quite as shocked, and had felt it far more, but he had hidden it well. Reggie Graham started and looked guilty, as if he had been partly to blame for those hollows round the beautiful eyes, and this sharpening of the delicate profile.

"Why! Have you been ill?" he said.

"Yes, I am ill now."

"How thin you are."

"I never was stout."

"No, but——" Graham lisped horribly, which showed he was nervous, and he moved uneasily,

as if he were trying to rock himself backwards and forwards on his heels.

"Won't you sit down?" Margaret inquired.

"Oh, ah! Thank you."

He took a seat, still staring at her, and tapped his lips with the nob of his stick.

She had never liked him, but she disliked him more than ever then, as he sat with his pale eyes fixed on her, till they watered from staring at one object so long, and he was forced to turn away.

"I want to ask you to do me a favour," she said.

"Anything you like. Only too charmed."

"I want you to answer me honestly all my questions."

"Delighted, I'm sure."

The eyes came back to her again, and she looked straight at them.

"Mr. Graham, has my husband been staying with you these last few days?"

Graham crossed one leg over the other, untwisted them again, and moved uneasily on his chair.

"Will you answer me?" Margaret said.

He began to guess what was the matter, and he reddened to the roots of his fair hair.

"What a funny question, Mrs. Morgan. Why, you know—you know, quite well."

"Tell me."

"Of course. Well, of course, you know—you know—you know."

Was there ever such a shifty look as the one he gave her—ever such a poor, weak, miserable creature as this worldling, in his faultless get-up and brainless imbecility?

"You said you would answer me," she said.

"Yes I—well, hang it all!—I beg your pardon—I mean I haven't seen him except for a few minutes for some time."

"Thank you; I thought so. Now will you be very kind and tell me something else?"

"I hope it isn't about your husband."

"No, it's about this woman—La Roche."

Heaven knows it took an effort to say it; but once done, she knew she had been right, for Graham leapt to his feet, and then sat down

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again, with his face a sickly cream in colour, and his lips a shade paler than usual.

“You see I know,” Margaret continued.  
“Now I want her address.”

Graham passed a limp hand across his brow.

“’Pon my word, Mrs. Morgan, I——”

“You know the address, or, if you do not, you can find it out.”

He wondered at her dignity, at the beauty of her pale face, the refinement of everything about her. His heart smote him as he remembered he had been the first to introduce Randal to La Roche, and afterwards had been careless indeed as to whether this young wife suffered or not. All that was best in his faulty nature rose to the surface.

“I will tell you, Mrs. Morgan ; I will do anything for you that I can. Shall I write it down ?”

“Yes ; there are pen and paper.” She indicated the direction, and he went and wrote it down for her, passing it to her when he had done.

“Thank you,” she said. “That is all.”

"Oh! surely I may help you in some way."

"No one can help me, Mr. Graham."

"Oh! I am so sorry; indeed I am. Do believe it. I wish I could do anything."

"You are very kind."

"I—'pon my word, I am sorry."

"Thank you. Good-bye."

At which he thought it better he should go, and hurriedly took his leave.

The day was very warm and sultry; Maggie lay, looking up at the heavy leaden sky and thought. How her life had changed! Not so very long ago Randal had been the most devoted of husbands and her life had been busy with his interests. In this very room, before they had started for Monte Carlo, he had told her how much he owed to her, and she had believed him to be all that she could have hoped him to be, and now—— Tears flowed down her thin cheeks, and she pressed her hot hands together and wondered if she were going mad. But through it all her last resource, her pathetic design that was to do so much, returned to her, and she settled to put it into execution the

next day. Anyone less innocent would never have done it. Her knowledge was confined to politics, and she knew very little of the world, being one of those women to whom other ladies do not gossip, from an instinctive feeling that she would dislike scandal.

Before the day ended the rain fell. Maggie lay in bed watching the lightning and listening to the thunder till she slept.

Outside in the streets people hurried past with umbrellas, and splashed themselves with mud as they crossed the wet roads. One man, driving along in a hansom, let the rain come in upon his face and evening-dress, careless of the consequences, and with a reckless pleasure in the storm. He stopped at a house in Pont Street, paid the man, and sprang out of the cab. It was past midnight, and, save during a flash of lightning, was very dark. He opened the door with a latch-key, and took off his boots in the hall. Then like a thief, in his own house, he crept upstairs. His face and coat were wet, his curly hair hung in small ringlets across his brow. He pushed it back, and drew out a

handkerchief to wipe his face. Then he softly pushed the door of a bedroom open, and peeped in. He dared not strike a match lest he should wake the sleeper, but he waited for the next flash of lightning and held his breath. It came, and showed her sleeping, as he had often seen her sleep, showed her white and worn, showed her young and innocent, with a look of suffering on her tired face that smote his craven soul with remorse, and turned him cowardly as he watched. It was dark again so soon that he waited for a second flash. What remorse, what last twinges of conscience had sent him to his wife's bedside, who can tell? Suffice to say that he was there, that he shook and trembled with the thunder, and at last, creeping nearer, bent over her and softly kissed her lips.

Once she might have moved and returned his embrace: once those white arms might have been flung round his neck, those heavy lids have opened, to show him eyes full of trust and love for him.

Now, in her sleep she sighed, a trembling breath that was more like a sob, and showed she



had been weeping before she slept. And he, startled and ashamed, crept away.

Out he went into the rain again and the night that was in keeping with himself. On, as if pursued by demons, as far from her as he could go.

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"Oh, you stupid, stupid little thing," screamed La Roche, accompanying each word with a slap; "you are on my dress, and it is muslin, and tears so easily. Naughty child! Look there."

*"Ma tante! Ma tante!"*

"Hush! Don't cry so. Get off it. Come here, Marie; this little nuisance has torn my dress. Bring a needle and cotton and mend it at once. Come here, baby."

"No, no. You will hurt me again."

The child backed, its small bare arm raised to protect its face.

"I will if you don't come at once."

"*Ma tante*," she sobbed. "*Ma tante*, I am sorry."

"Come here. What did I tell you?"

The child obeying at last, she struck it on the face, and then suddenly remorseful, caught it in her arms and smothered it with kisses.

*"Dis donc, ma petite. You are not triste any more? See, I am not angry now. Kiss me. There, don't cry so. Your aunt loves you very well. Chérie, what is the matter? I am so tired of this crying."*

*"Ma tante!"* repeated the small morsel of humanity, hiding its face in her breast; and the two words resembled a wail of pain, and would have touched anyone else.

"Oh, you little stupid to cry so long. Think, *notre ami* will be here soon, this kind Monsieur Randal. Dry your eyes, or he will think you ugly. Oh! *Chérie*, I shall be cross if you cry any more."

*"Tu m'aimes, ma tante?"*

"Yes, yes, I love you; there, that is right. Dry your eyes, and take care of my dress another time. Is it finished, Marie? That is right. Now, baby, run away."

*"Mais, non! Please let me stay."*

"No, no; I must write a letter. Marie, do

take her away and wash her, and brush her hair. I really think I shall cut it short like my own, it gets so untidy."

"*Ah, oui, ma tante.* May I have it cut now?"

"If you like, I am sure I don't care. Does it curl naturally, do you think, Marie?"

"Oh, yes, mademoiselle."

"Well, I thought it did. Don't look offended. Take her away, do, and amuse yourself by cutting it short. Go, baby."

The child lifted its small face to be kissed, and she bent her head and touched its forehead with her lips. Perhaps a red mark that reached across the soft little cheek made her feel ashamed, for she was eager to get it out of the way, and pushed it impatiently from her.

As she sat at her writing-table, the quill between her red lips, her eyes wandered out of the window, and her thoughts flew to her beloved South, and she sighed. After all, London was very hot and dusty, and she knew a villa just outside Paris, where the orange blossoms grew, and where the garden was a perfect wilderness

of flowers, within a stone's throw of the Bois de Boulogne. Then, from there, she could go to Monte Carlo or Nice again, if only Randal would come too. Yes, she must be off somewhere, if not to Boulogne, to some seaside place such as gay Trouville, or Dieppe with its pretty races. She could be well amused there, instead of boring herself in this hot dull London, long after most people would have left Paris for some months, till they returned to it in late November.

She wore a white muslin dress, and her throat was bare, and clasped by her beautiful pearls. At her breast was a superb diamond crescent, and her fingers were heavy with diamond rings. A fan lay on the ground at her feet, and the dagger Randal had lent her months ago at Monte Carlo kept her place in Bourget's "Disciple."

She hummed a gay little French air, and pouted a little, because Randal was late. If ever she had looked beautiful, she looked so then; if ever she looked childish, she looked so at that moment. The very hand that had struck the child, who had only "*sa tante*" to love in

the world, lay fair and soft across the white paper. But gradually, as she sat, her face changed. The pouting lips elongated into a straight line, the large childish eyes looked dangerously angry, the hand that played with the pen dropped it and clenched its fist, as if she could beat the life out of the half-finished letter below. For if Randal was late, perhaps he lingered with his wife, perhaps——

A ring at the bell, steps on the stairs, a knock at the door of her sitting-room. Randal at last!

"Come in," she cried, still ready to quarrel with him, still vexed at his delay, and in consequence, with her back to the door, still sitting at the writing-table attempting to finish her letter.

"*Mais mon ami, mon cher Randal.* How late you are! *Comme tu es méchant,* do you hear?"

No answer. La Roche turned, sprang to her feet, and faced her visitor.

No Randal. Only a lady clad in black, who was a vast contrast to herself. A lady without

ornaments of any kind ; a lady who was tall and thin and dignified, but who, also, was very white and looked ill.

"Where have I seen your face before?" La Roche muttered ; "*Comme c'est drôle*, I know it well, and yet—— *Ah ! Mon Dieu !* I have it ! You are Mrs. Morgan."

"Yes." The voice was so cool, so refined, so unlike her own.

"*Ah ! Eh bien !* What do you want here?"

"I came to see you."

"Or to seek your husband ?

Every evil passion in the woman leapt to the surface, and was reflected in her face. But she had her back to the light, so that her visitor could scarcely see her expression.

"Madame," said Maggie, "I have something to say to you."

The woman set her white teeth, and almost ground them with rage. Untouched, unmoved, her beautiful rival must always remain above her. An angel, where she was something so far below ; a being good and pure, where she was bad. Could nothing change the innocence of

that white face? She would gladly have struck it as she had struck the child.

"Something to say to me. Had you not better talk to your husband?"

"No; you are a woman like myself, and therefore must have a woman's heart, must have pity. I come to appeal to your pity. I come to ask you to give me back my husband—wait, not to me, to the world which honoured him, to the country he worked for, to the friends who believed in him. Indeed, madame, I am sure you cannot know how he has neglected his work of late. I am sure you cannot wish to ruin him."

There was an evil look in the baby face as if she enjoyed something.

"You see," Margaret continued, "I do not plead for myself, I only ask you to send this man back to his duty, to let him be his old, strong, reliant self once more. You must have great power, madame, or you could not have ruled him as you have done. Won't you use it for his good? Won't you be generous, and save him from himself?"

"You must have been mad to come," La Roche said between her teeth.

"Oh, madame! do not say so. There are so many wives who suffer as I have done and who have their pride to help them. I throw mine aside, and plead to you for my husband's sake. If you have ever suffered in your life, think what I have suffered, and be more gentle with me, for indeed I wish you no harm; I only ask you to save my husband, and if you love him, my love teaches me that you must have his happiness nearest your heart, even to the exclusion of your own."

"You must be mad," repeated La Roche. "Ah! you," to the child, who came running in to show its cropped little head. "Ah! you had better not come near me now."

"*Ma tante*, see my hair, it is like your pretty curls; I am so happy. Oh! who is the beautiful lady? Must I go away?"

"You had better, lest I punish you again. I am in no mood to be resisted. Go!"

"Oh, madame," said Maggie, "let this child plead for me. As you love your child, pity me,



for I one day hope to hold my child in my arms, and pray to God to bless it. Little one, come here; kneel with me and ask your mother to be kind to me, for I need help badly."

The child, attracted by her sweet face, ran to Maggie and knelt, with its little hand in hers, and its small, wistful face raised towards La Roche.

"Oh!" screamed the woman, half-mad with passion, "you two get up. *You!*" (to the child) "tell her who you are! A circus baby, picked out of the gutter—no child of mine! And you, my pretty lady, with your prudish face, let her alone, and know that I pray you may never live to be the mother of Randal's child—never live!"

*"Ma tante! ma tante!"*

She seized it, dragged it to the door, and pushed it into the other room.

Maggie rose from her knees, her face blanched with horror, her eyes wide open with astonishment.

"You cannot mean what you say," she said.

"Mean it! *Mon Dieu!* what else should I mean? Know that I hate—have always hated you, and am glad you have suffered. Know that I could have no greater pleasure than to see you weep, to see you pleading to Randal in vain. Know that in this hour, which is my triumph, I glory to think that you, who are good, are afraid of me, who pretend to nothing of the sort—are afraid of me, whom Randal loves, and whose lightest word can move him easier than all your tears."

"Oh! do not speak like that; you will be sorry afterwards."

"Sorry! You do not know me. Oh!" she groaned, like a wild beast in sight of its prey, "Oh! you madden me with your horrified eyes and your white face."

"Madame La Roche, I beseech you——"

"Be silent, or I shall strike you. Ah! I knew you were afraid. Are you a coward, you white girl? *Dites.*"

"No," said Margaret, bravely, "I am not afraid of you; I am only sorry I came; I made a mistake. I thought you would have a good

heart—would have some good in you that my words might rouse to life. I find——”

La Roche dropped her hand on to Bourget's “Disciple.”

“I find that you are unlike any woman I have ever seen. That I cannot even understand all you mean; that I should never have so lowered myself as to plead to you—even for the sake of the child——”

“Le Disciple” fell with a crash on the ground, the child in the next room ceased crying to listen, and then screamed aloud.

\* \* \* \* \*

Randal Morgan was strolling away from the Houses of Parliament. He was four hours late already; what would La Roche say? After all, she must be pacified somehow. She had taught him to miss appointments. How hot the day was; perhaps they were going to have another storm. How the great politician had avoided him in the lobby, and how strange Lawson had looked when he inquired after Maggie. Maggie asleep! Would he ever dare to go and

watch her again as he had done last night? Would he ever again see her troubled face, forgetful of his presence, at rest? After all, what had he to do with her now? He was fit only for such women as La Roche—a poor creature with no purpose, no aim in life. A man who was afraid to think, because thinking brought remorse. A man who had been almost too daring, too brave, turned into a coward at last. A man who dreaded to meet his one-time equals because he knew he was no longer their equal. A man who despised himself, and yet could see no way to doing otherwise until he died. His mood was a reckless one. "I and Cécile had better go away and hide ourselves," he thought; "we and the child. The child!" What if he ever had a child of his own, a child who should live to be ashamed of its father! Better far if it were never born. His mood was reckless indeed. Cécile must comfort him, persuade him that he was fanciful, and yet he somehow dreaded going to her that evening. She would be angry, displeased with him, and he was in no mood to be scolded, and yet how

T

sweetly she would ask his forgiveness afterwards.

He suddenly stopped, finding a man standing in front of him was trying to shake hands.

"I beg your pardon," he said, and then, to his great surprise, recognised the Italian.

"I am charmed to see you again," that gentleman remarked.

He was just as thin and graceful, just as cool as ever. He appeared so little glad to see Randal that his "charmed" was almost ludicrous, and yet in his careless, bored way of taking life he was perhaps more amused at seeing Randal than anyone else.

"What on earth are you doing in London?" inquired Randal.

"What are any of us doing here? Killing time, I suppose!"

His long thin hand went up to the side of his head and smoothed the grey hair above his ears.

"Have you seen Franklin?"

"Yes, and Graham, and Dotty, and even Lord Chester, who was exceedingly astonished to find me here. I do not know why."

"Then you have run against all our old friends?"

"Yes, all. I have seen La Roche, too."

"La Roche! When?"

"One, two, three times. Does that astonish you?"

"Yes. She did not tell me."

"She would not, monsieur. I wanted her to come South for a short time."

"Indeed!"

"Yes!" The Italian's face seemed to possess a kind of flicker of a smile for a second, and then settled into its impassable expression again.

"Of course, she said no?"

Randal was hot, excited, and ashamed.

"Of course, she said no." The Italian mimicked him. "At first, but now I have received a telegram that tells a different tale."

"You—you lie!"

The Italian whistled. "Pardon me. You insult me. But perhaps that is your wish."

"No, I assure you. May I see the telegram?"

"Certainly; with exquisite pleasure, my dear monsieur. Here it is."

Randal glanced at it.

"To meet her in Paris to-morrow. So," with an effort, "you go to meet her."

"I go with pleasure. You see, monsieur, we are old friends."

"Yes, yes. I see."

"You scarcely seem to believe now."

"I shall go to her rooms at once and see her."

"That is wise. To say farewell, of course ; I will say good-bye, monsieur."

"Good-bye." Randal pretended not to see the proffered hand, but turned on his heel and strode away. She should not go, he thought, for once she should see that his will was stronger than her own. He hailed a hansom and drove quickly away. Once at the house the landlady opened the door herself, and, trembling, told him that Mdle. La Roche had gone.

"She has not gone," Randal answered. "I know she will not be in Paris till to-morrow morning. You want to prevent me going up-stairs."

"No, indeed, sir, I do not. Mademoiselle

has locked her rooms and taken the key. She will return to-morrow ; I was to tell you this."

"Did she leave no letter?"

"No, oh no, sir!"

"Has the maid gone too?"

"Yes, and the little young lady, who cried a good deal at going."

"I must go upstairs and see for myself."

"Sir, the doors are locked."

"I have my own key, thank you, and I don't believe you. Now let me pass."

The woman stood aside trembling. He seized a candle from her hand and rushed up the stairs.

"Cécile," he called out, still believing her to be there. Cécile, my darling, open the door. It is I, Randal. I must see you. Open quickly."

No answer.

"Cécile, *chérie*, you will let me come in. I am not vexed with you. I am ready to explain why I was late. Cécile, Cécile, why do you keep me waiting?"

Still no answer.



His feet stuck in something that was oozing from under the door. He lowered the candle and looked at it. There alone in the dark passage his heart beat violently, and his breath came in quick, short gasps. He bent and touched it with his fingers; it was clammy and a deep red. The strong man shook from head to foot. His trembling fingers fumbled for the key, and at length found it. Even then he could hardly turn it in the lock.

When he had done so he grew cowardly of entering the room. He hesitated and pushed the door a little way, and dared not look. Then suddenly he flung it open and stepped forward.

"Cécile," he whispered huskily, "Cécile, where are you?"

Silence!

He stumbled over something and fell, so that he lay side by side with this black heap on the ground. His face almost touched it; he gradually moved back his head, his eyes starting from their sockets, his teeth chattering with fear. The candle was on the floor, but had not blown out in falling. He shut his eyes. The horror

of lying in a pool of blood, side by side with this dead thing as he had lain——.

His hand touched something cold ; he dared to glance at it, and recognised the dagger he had given Cécile months ago. He must be brave. He slowly turned his head, clutched at the heap beside him till the face looked towards his.

Then he screamed aloud like a madman—screamed horribly, hoarsely out into the dark room :

“Maggie! Maggie!”

No more fear, only a life-long remorse, only such agony as Judas must have felt. He laid his face close to hers, as he had thought never to lie again, and he mumbled to himself, even when they brought lights and found them together, the living and the dead, in the bed of blood :

“Maggie! Maggie!”

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